

The Anatomy of Genius

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FREDERIC TAUBES

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ANATOMY OF GENIUS

*"If science is research into nature's energies,
art is research into nature's spirit."*

BOOKS BY FREDERIC TAUBES

The Technique of Oil Painting (1941)

The Art and Technique of Oil Painting
(*London, England, 1948*)

You Don't Know What You Like (1942)

Studio Secrets (1943)

Oil Painting for the Beginner (1945)

The Amateur Painter's Handbook (1947)

The Painter's Question and Answer Book (1948)



ANATOMY OF GENIUS

*A Guide to Understanding and
Intelligent Judging of Paintings by*

FREDERIC TAUBES

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I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of Miss Leah Sewell in helping me to gather my thoughts on paper in orderly fashion. Also to my son, Frank, my thanks for valuable suggestions and expert advice.

F. T.

P R E F A C E

TOO OFTEN, paintings, because they carry an illustrious signature, are appraised as great works of art although their intrinsic merit may be slight; on the other hand, it is not uncommon for truly great works of art to remain unrecognized through long periods of time. It is not only the instability of esthetic evaluation which creates this confusion, but also the fortuitous economic laws of supply and demand. A rare painting, like a rare antique, will be especially cherished. This transmutation of esthetic into monetary values is a feat of alchemy rather than of reason, but our mundane economic laws seem often not far removed from alchemistic practice. Sometimes it is the fashion of a moment to which the public and the connoisseur alike subscribe; all such random phenomena, however, do not preclude the existence of certain standards of judgment and criteria of greatness which transcend any arbitrary considerations.

The purpose of this book is to clarify the enigma of a masterpiece and to point to its inherent, immutable values. In order to establish these values in a work of art, we shall use a method of analysis which will lead to the isolation of the various qualities of a painting. We shall study, as it were, the anatomy of a painting, probe for its weakness and its strength. We have chosen for this book only works which have passed the supreme test—the test of time. To be sure, the intelligent observer will recognize without fail the good and the bad even in the art of his own time; the proverbial test of time is not the only absolute judgment of values, but this test is the only one to determine the importance of a work of art in history and civilization.

Every work of art is a complex organization containing a variety of distinct elements all of which may be measured with fair accuracy. A work of art, no matter how sublime, is yet a work of human mind and human hands. It should, therefore, fit into the orbit of human intellect. Esoteric and mystic speculations must be excluded from esthetic research. The topography of a painting is plastic and measurable; it is measurable with fair accuracy, and all the fine variations and differentiations which mark the degree of mastery can, as a rule, be explored and registered. There is no reason why the subtleties of works of art, be they ever so fine, should filter through the coarse meshes of our comprehension and thus elude classification.

Of course, personal preferences in the choice of a particular masterpiece will always exist, and such preferences will influence our judgment. But we must also be aware that the personal relation of an individual to a painting is not usually based on objective research and study; it is more often the consequence of the beholder's personal experience, and of his mental temper and associations.

In applying our analytical measures we shall try to avoid falling victim to our own taste, which has also been conditioned by experience and circumstance. To escape, as far as possible, from the pitfalls of personal likes and dislikes, let us try to find a master key to an objective judgment.

Greatness in art is not understood a priori. Judgment in art is a matter of comparative evaluation. A common error is that of confusing personal taste with artistic judgment. Judgment implies laws or principles; canons of art have grown out of experience, and esthetic principles were not known as abstractions, but were recognized as they were embodied in great works. It has seemed just and advisable, therefore, to compare some of the masterpieces with works of kindred schools but of lesser quality. The relative inferiority of a Lorenzo di Credi or a

Luini, for example, can be readily recognized when we contrast their paintings with a work of Leonardo da Vinci.

To compare the qualities of masters of entirely different outlooks would be inconclusive, because their aims were too diverse to allow for a fair evaluation. Painters working in different directions and employing opposite means of expression can be equally great, each in his own way. So the apparent contradiction when I praise the lack of flamboyant color in one instance, and extol the presence of such colors in another, is really no contradiction at all—different circumstances can change the faces of all virtues.

After careful deliberation it was decided to use half-tone reproductions of the paintings herein discussed. Even in the best of colored prints the real tone values are only hinted at, because all hues of any one color come from the same pot of printers' ink. A colored reproduction can at best suggest, and may sometimes even falsify, the coloristic ideas of the painter; often a black and white photograph, because it leaves so much unsaid about the color scheme, stimulates the imagination more effectively. This is in keeping with the aim of this book. The analyses presented here are intended to point out a *method of reasoning*, rather than to impose on the reader and student the conviction of any painting's greatness. Such a conviction can be gained only in the presence of the original.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

BEFORE entering into discussion and analyses of paintings, let us first establish a standard by which to measure the merits of a painting, and, in order to avoid confusion, let us clarify technical nomenclature and agree upon certain definitions. Esthetic terms are often vague; words frequently change their meaning with time, and their original purport becomes obsolete or altogether lost.

When examining a painting we observe that it is made up of a number of elements, such as *paint quality*, *color* (and the *tonal relationships*), *composition (design)*, *draftsmanship*. We will furthermore discover that a painting is *lighted* in a certain manner, that it has or has not *chiaroscuro*, and that its contents suggest *imagination*, *originality*, and the presence or absence of *taste*. These elements constitute the body of a painting—*paint quality*, *color*, *composition (design)*, *draftsmanship*—as well as the abstract content derived from *imagination*, and expressed by virtue of the painter's originality. The element of *taste* rules all these principles.

Any explanation or evaluation of a painting venturing beyond the realm of these elements becomes a matter of archaeological, philosophical, iconographic, social, theological, or other consideration. Unfortunately, today most writers on esthetics, when discussing a painting in the name of art appreciation, refer to one or another of these implications and seldom to the intrinsic quality of the painting, upon which it ultimately stands or falls. Perhaps it is the philosophical angle more than any other which leads most of the critics astray and causes them to

expand into a vacuum of high-sounding vagaries and semimythical speculations.

The legitimate standards for esthetic research, which I have already set down, are not new: they have been known under various terms—to-day outmoded—throughout the history of civilization and are applicable to any “style” or direction in art, be it classic, expressionistic, or abstract.

Of course, every painting does not have all the elements which comprise our standard. Usually only a few of the elements will be represented; then again, the strength of these elements will vary according to the painter’s powers.

Let us now investigate and define the various elements to which we refer as our standard of judgment.

Paint quality comprises three distinct characteristics: *texture*, *brush-stroke*, *contour*. *Texture* refers to the surface appearance of a painting; in other words, texture represents the physical characteristics of the paint. The paint surface may be opaque, transparent, or semitransparent; it may be smooth, or pastose. A smooth as well as a pastose paint application will often reveal the brush-stroke. *Brush-stroke* can be likened to handwriting: it registers the nervous mechanism of the painter.

Contour is the outline of an object. Such an outline is, for example, the outer edge of a figure set against the background, or the edge of lips set against the flesh of the face, and the like.

Paint quality and *craftsmanship* are synonymous. The former is a rather recent term; the latter has of late become obsolescent in this sense, because it is commonly accepted that craftsmanship is chiefly the issue of skill and virtuosity. For some reason skill and virtuosity in a painter are today looked upon as a handicap rather than an asset, or at least these qualities are held in little regard.

All the great works of art possess paint quality; all the great masters were perfect craftsmen. Some of them, like El Greco, were preoccupied



DETAIL FROM THE ANNUNCIATION • EL GRECO

with the orchestration of contours (see illustration); others, like Bellini, stressed textures. Some, like Raphael, were after mechanical perfection of paint-surface, perfection expressed in over-all smoothness, careful blending of colors (which contemporary taste is so against); and for other painters, the eloquence of energetic brush-strokes was all important. Frans Hals is one of the foremost among the brush-stroke virtuosi.

Color is of great importance, because a bad color, that is, a color which is inharmonious, garish, or dull, may seriously affect the quality of a painting and—if flagrantly bad—nullify all its other merits. The coloristic appearance of a painting is not necessarily dependent upon the richness of the color scheme, but more often on subtlety in the choice of colors and the use of tonal variations.

Frans Hals, for example, understood how to produce an extraordinarily variable scale of greys which are not relieved by any strong color, yet offer most pleasurable coloristic sensations to the eye. Rembrandt's colors, too, were mostly greyed (reduced in key) and, although they satisfy our esthetic sensibilities just as do the strong colors, their emotional impact is entirely different from that experienced in the presence of flamboyant colors such as used by Grünewald.

Design is the formal relation of lines or patterns in a painting. Generally, this pattern is of an abstract rather than a representational nature; it is conceived as a flat, two-dimensional line-conglomerate. When objects suggesting the third dimension, that is, depth, are introduced into a painting, we speak of a *composition*.

Composition serves to organize various parts of a picture and to relate them to one another, so that they can fulfill their predetermined function in a painting. This predetermined function of composition is the attainment of *balance* and *emphasis*. When a painting has balance we say that it hangs together well; all units serve one purpose. No one unit can be moved without creating a disturbance or leaving a noticeable vacuum in the ensemble. Without good composition a painting would

lack interest. It would fail to please the eye and gratify our sensibilities. *Emphasis* is needed to bring the composition to a dramatic climax. Emphasis depends upon the most insistent and eloquent presentation of that part of the painting which has been assigned the dominant position within the composition. All other units of a composition should be subordinated to this dominant motif; they should be only as road signs to lead the attention to it. Sometimes, however, emphasis may be put on several or on all parts of a composition; whether single or multiple will depend largely upon the adherence of the painter to one or another school of painting.

Draftsmanship is the ability to represent objects by linear means. Draftsmanship is a supplementary element in picture making; it should be well concealed and should not transgress its limited and assistant function in a painting. That is why we often speak of "drawing with colors," when the linear treatment is too obtrusive. Drawing with colors means merely filling in the contours with colors instead of "painting with colors." Of course, favoring or disfavoring subordination of drawing in a painting is a matter of ever-changing style.

By reason of technical limitations the medieval and early Renaissance painting stressed the linear ideas which were in keeping with the tempera traditions, prior to the development of oil painting techniques. But even painters highly skilled in all phases of oil techniques still elaborated on the linear aspects—Carpaccio, Bellini, Brueghel. Eventually the "archaic" approach lost its appeal. Velazquez, Frans Hals, Goya, are all representatives of a purely "painterly" art.

Distortion, that is, an aberration from the norm, is simply a conditioned proportion. It is used in art as an instrument for added expressiveness. When mentioning "aberrations from the norm," it is the classic norm to which I refer. Some of the nonclassic painters, in lieu of a better nomenclature, may collectively be termed "Expressionists." Thus many works of El Greco or Grünewald can be considered expressionistic, although they still retain many classic principles. (The modern

Expressionists, however, as a rule abandon completely classic traditions and rely on forms derived from primitive or exotic sources.)

The manner in which light is used in a painting is of great importance. The illumination of a painting known as *chiaroscuro* is an interplay of light and shade for plastic emphasis; it is the most important means of achieving sculptural effects. Practically all the classic paintings rely in greater or less degree on the use of the *chiaroscuro* method of painting. However, besides the *chiaroscuro* method, there are other means of lighting, such as the use of a diffused light, which does not produce shadows. In classic painting such an approach is evident in the late work of Velazquez.

Through the medium of *originality* the painter interprets nature in a manner which is his own, and thus communicates to the beholder a new experience. The value and scope of the new experience evoked differs with every painter. Originality may be found in one, several, or in all of the constituent elements; one may speak of original color, composition, lighting, brush-stroke, etc. *Imagination* is related to originality; originality presupposes imagination but imagination need not necessarily be original. An imaginative conception accounts for poetic approach, power of interpretation, invention, and psychological penetration.

The influence of *taste* will be found in most of the elements of a painting. As referred to a work of art, taste is a complex entity. First, the classic tradition of good taste is expressed in definite proportions, such as, for instance, the classic proportions of the human body. In relation to color, good taste is dependent upon traditional experience with pleasing color harmonies. Taste may be a matter of adventure, too; it is not often recognized as "good" until the once new sensation becomes a familiar and tested experience.

In a work of art taste may also be understood as referring to the decorative expositions of a painting. These decorative expositions may be likened to the outer vesture of a painting—not to its soul. In this con-

text taste is only an extraneous quality, and the painting which relies too heavily on taste may become a mere ornament.

Taste, can be, most particularly, an expression of the mental attitude of the painter. This mental attitude is often responsible for what is referred to somewhat ambiguously as "the conception of a painting." The conception of a painting may be entirely disconnected from its physical qualities, such as color, composition, and the like, and may be revealed only by its subject matter. Subject matter which expresses false sentimentality or any form of banality, for example, gives evidence of bad taste.

An aura of bad taste resulting from a trivial conception can be found in Ferdinand Bol's *Philosopher in Meditation*, for example, or in Jordaen's *The King Drinks*, in which vulgarities in subject matter are not redeemed by artistry. In fact, the artistry of a painting can, by its own virtue, purify the vulgar of its coarseness, and endow it with symbolic meaning and metaphoric power.

A painting should not be approached directly, with a surgeon's scalpel, as it were. The spectator should allow it to have its way with him, give free rein to his personal preferences and inclinations of taste, and see whether the painting can win him. Any affinity, or love, which a person may feel for a work of art may be quite independent of the perfection of its formal qualities. Usually the first feeling aroused is kindled by the associative iconography of a painting.

Next, one should try to discover the painter's intentions, and attempt to understand how he has achieved his aims. For this purpose, a systematic study of a painting's elements should follow along the lines here developed. In accurately assessing these intentions and achievements art criticism can become a creative pursuit.

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JAN VERMEER
(1 6 3 2 - 1 6 7 5)

THE ARTIST AT WORK IN HIS STUDIO
(*Collection Czernin, Vienna*)



THE ARTIST AT WORK IN HIS STUDIO • JAN VERMEER

JAN VERMEER

THE ARTIST AT WORK IN HIS STUDIO

DURING his lifetime Vermeer enjoyed a great reputation not only with the public but also among painters, for he was made head of the Painters' Guild at the early age of thirty. But shortly after his death he and his work sank into oblivion for almost two centuries.

It is easy to understand that the work of artists who cultivate the exotic or the eccentric might not have universal appeal. But Vermeer was a painter of simple, domestic subject matter, the typical genre painter; nevertheless, his work did not find a loving public for an interval of two centuries after his time. What, one wonders, could be more easily comprehended than such themes as *Woman Reading a Letter*, or *Lace Maker* or *Woman With a Water Jug*? And yet, there must be a strange quality about these paintings—a quality which spreads about them an aura of aloofness and thus veils them from general acceptance.

The painting here represented is very characteristic of Vermeer's gifts—his use of light, and pristine simplicity of design. Since current taste has been schooled on the functional and unornamental, the severity of the architecture should attract us immediately. The balance and compactness of the composition rest on unerring perpendiculars and a few rigid horizontals, which lend extreme solidity to the whole. The objects are arranged in such a manner that none of them could be removed or added without disturbing the equilibrium and the harmony of the composition. There are no superfluous paraphernalia or irrele-

vant decorative expositions, nor any display of eye-catching bric-à-brac cluttering up the plane of the picture. Like all good compositions, this painting is easily reducible to a simple geometrical arrangement, that is, to an abstract design. The design, then, (next to the use of light) is one of Vermeer's greatest achievements. By way of contrast, recall the work of Rembrandt, for example, where design is subordinate to a dramatic chiaroscuro.

During any epoch in which the florid, pompous, and fanciful are cherished, Vermeer's design would find no appeal. His extraordinary paint quality, however, remains independent of time taste, for it communicates itself immediately. The painting is small and lacks impasto, but the thinness of the paint application does not appear meager and impoverished as it usually does in such techniques. The perfect finish is not, as can be readily recognized, the result of mere diligence. Of course, one's taste may not favor the immaculate finish—Cézanne considered it "vulgar and the preoccupation of an imbecile"—and one may find his delight in Cézanne's sketchy technique. But an immaculate finish need not necessarily be vulgar. To quote Sir Kenneth Clark: "The finish may be an expression of a heightened intensity; it may be in itself a formal language in which some moods can find their only possible utterance." The mood of Vermeer could express itself only in such a finish, polished and heightened to perfection; together with a perfect design, the gem-like finish creates an air of cold and unalterable finality.

Another aspect of the paint quality lies in the incredibly delicate treatment of the contours. How different are they from the contours of El Greco! Vermeer modulated his outlines with the precision of a diamond cutter. The candelabra, the curtain, the figure, the map on the wall are all contoured with a subtle nuancing which is never arbitrary. Sometimes—not so much in this painting—Vermeer's contours have an almost pointillistic appearance which creates a sensation of soft atmosphere enclosing the objects.

As for his colors—it does not seem appropriate, somehow, to refer

to a "yellow," a "red" or a "blue." So refined and conditioned are the colors, so extraordinary in the delicacy and harmony of their values, that they merit a new nomenclature. In Vermeer's work, more than in that of any other painter the concepts of paint quality and color are inseparable. Is this magic web the result of contour-refinement, color-gradation, or manipulation of brush-stroke? This, indeed, is difficult to say; most likely it is a blend of all these qualities.

After having acknowledged the mastery demonstrated in this painting, I shall add that it has all been done without inner ardor. The cold fact of mastery is not always enough to arouse one's enthusiasm. Van Gogh felt this when he viewed Vermeer's paintings, for later he wrote: "The Dutchman had no imagination, but he had tremendous taste and an unerring sense of composition." One might add that it is the artist's objectivity which creates this mood of detachment. Unlike the expressionistic Van Gogh, Vermeer does not reveal what he feels, but merely what he sees.

REMBRANDT

(1606-1669)

LUCRETIA

(The Art Institute, Minneapolis)

DETAIL FROM LUCRETIA

FERDINAND BOL

(1616-1680)

PHILOSOPHER IN MEDITATION

(The Louvre, Paris)

NICHOLAS MAES

(1632-1693)

OLD WOMAN PARING APPLES

(Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin)



LUCRETIA · REMBRANDT

REMBRANDT

LUCRETIA

THIS painting is a document of the painter's passion for his craft. All over it is impressed his abandonment to the soul and body of his creation. His passion is registered in the paint with a breadth, power, and command of means seen only in the work of the greatest artists. If we recognize that skill is an important element in picture making, virtuosity must be looked upon as the highest form of skill. Yet the term virtuosity cannot be used in connection with the execution of this painting. Virtuosity today carries an implication of the desire to display to the world the gift of one's hands. But in painting the *Lucretia* it seems as though Rembrandt had divested himself of all vanity and pride in his prowess. He had renounced the temptation to try to please anyone any longer. Beyond hope of redemption in his time, Rembrandt perhaps no longer cared to please even himself. In *Lucretia* there is not even a color to entice the eye and gratify the senses. There is only light left—light and infinite shadows. To sacrifice the enchantment of color, to yield this instrument of persuasion and seduction, is a great thing indeed. Only a painter who had detached himself from all thought of reward could forego the use of color. It is the lack of color and affectation so noticeable in *Lucretia* which made a contemporary art critic, one Gerard de Laraisse, call Rembrandt a master capable of painting nothing but vulgar and prosaic subjects, who merely achieved an effect of rottenness.

Someone must have posed for the painting; the homely realism of the

face is not conceived from imagination; the plain, awkward figure displays none of the voluptuousness that one might expect of the subject. Rembrandt's *Lucretia* belonged, evidently, to the ghetto of Amsterdam. She was not in the prime of her youth when he painted her, and he did not try to improve upon her appearance. There are traces of aging below the chin and on her neck. The face is painted with great restraint; no eager, fleeting brush-strokes mark the serenity of the countenance. With utter humility, it is apparent, Rembrandt followed the Creator's design. However, in spite of the well-considered approach, there is nowhere a sign of caution or hesitancy. When painting larger areas and then giving his attention to details, for instance, Rembrandt did not bother to change from the large brushes to the small ones—a bold, jagged stroke divides the lips, and another bold stroke shapes the nostrils. Only a mastery resulting from long practice and searching study could allow a painter the successful use of such a technique.

Although the face shows great beauty of execution, such pictorial quality is not rare in Rembrandt's late work. What makes this presentation unique is the depth of the subject's character. It has become a convention to say that Rembrandt painted with psychological insight—a balky and foreboding phrase. In all paintings there is a concrete reason which accounts for depth or shallowness. The depth of Rembrandt's character representation is achieved mainly by the use of light and shade. It is the shade which clouds the forehead, the light on the eyelid which makes it mournful. It is the roughness of the lip contours which suggest pain. The particular character of the model was, in fact, unimportant; it was his own depth which Rembrandt imparted to his models and he conveyed it with all his sovereign command of means—a most original mastery of chiaroscuro, paint quality, and power of imagination.

A heavy but relatively smooth impasto was used for the face, but the hair is rendered merely with a glaze. Where the hair reaches over



DETAIL FROM LUCRETIA • REMBRANDT

the shoulder, it becomes apparent how thin the glaze is—it reveals clearly the white of the shirt underneath. In the upper part, where the head is covered with a headdress, the relief of the impasto stands out in a pattern plastically raised like a smooth-edged plateau above the darkened flatlands. Flat, smooth, and utterly dark, is also the background. Oddly, in the velvety depth of the dark hair one single pearl, palpably raised, glitters like a headlight.

There is extraordinary beauty in the pictorial treatment—particularly in the handling of the costume. Its color disposition is most simple—the white and gray of the shirt is set off by the golden glaze of the mantle, where a pale yellow is thickly laid to indicate the texture of the brocade. This texture, and the cuffs of the sleeves, are indicated by only a few strokes of the palette knife. The complete freedom of handling, the power of direct statement seen in the painting of the mantle, has never been excelled. Nothing seems to have been altered, weakened, or modified. Sweeping passages of the swiftly striking palette knife alternate with impetuous brushwork. Opaque passages are relieved by glazes.

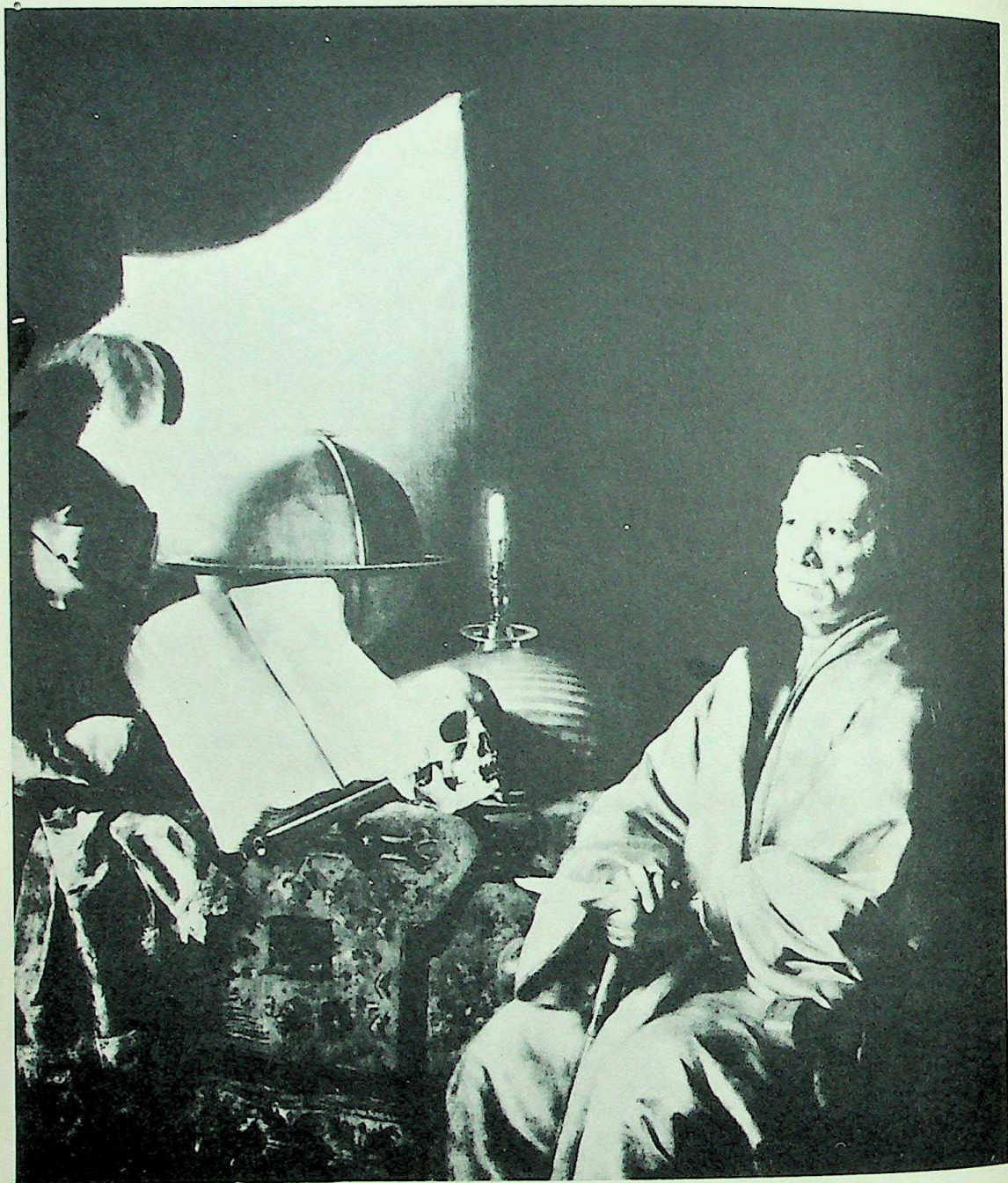
Evidently the light-colored underpainting of the mantle was laid on thickly with the palette knife and no attempt was made to smooth out this foundation. Upon it a golden glaze was spread with brush and knife. Without doubt Rembrandt flouted orthodox procedure and executed the glazes with a palette knife. The freedom of this handling can hardly be surpassed in any contemporary work, so “modern” was the master’s paint technique.

Unlike the treatment of the mantle, the shirt shows only brush strokes of a crisp and sharp structure. To counteract the monotony of the large and somewhat static surface, a chain of jewels was strung across the body. Again plastically raised, these jewels are smooth-edged; they sparkle from within a bed of golden glaze which is sunk into the crevices of the paint impasto.

The whole painting shows considerable roughness and lack of finish, such as would be inconceivable in the work of a Raphael or a Dürer.

But just because of the lack of finish, just because the paint passages were not smoothed out and polished with patience and care, the handwriting of the painter can more plainly be read. A superfinish will attest a painter's skill and diligence, but it can also weaken the freshness and spontaneity of his statement.

Lucretia is highly provocative as a subject for shop talk, something for professionals to mull over, but it is by no means beyond the understanding of any intelligent student or lover of art. Art connoisseurs sometimes scoff at technicalities. Technique is, in some quarters, looked upon as a nuisance with which the artist need not dally. However, every technique is intimately associated with the esthetic concept of a painting; indeed, it arises from it and is not merely a matter of mechanical manipulation. The technical and the esthetic concepts of a painting cannot, as a rule, be dissociated. It was his technique which permitted Rembrandt to express what he felt. He did not have the full means of expression at an early age. When we compare his work with that of his pupils or of other painters of the period, we find that none of them ever acquired either the subtlety or the force of his devices. Without a close study of Rembrandt's technique as documented in his later period, an understanding of his greatness as a painter is impossible.



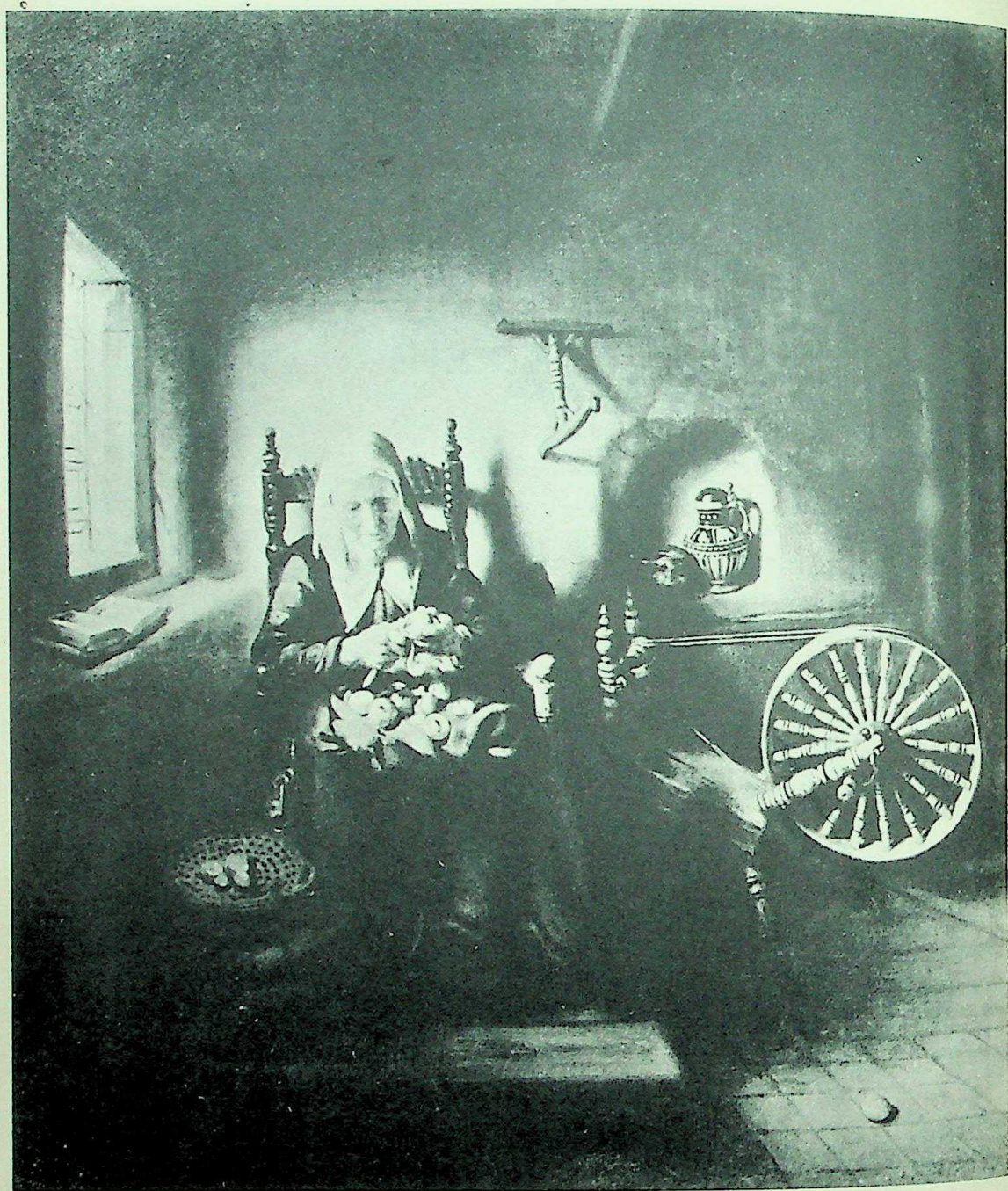
PHILOSOPHER IN MEDITATION • FERDINAND BOL

F E R D I N A N D B O L

PHILOSOPHER IN MEDITATION

THEY are all here—the accouterments of a grandiloquent melancholia: the globe, the helmet, the lute, the book of wisdom. But, alas there is not much wisdom in the painting. The philosopher and his paraphernalia vie for the honor of capturing the beholder's attention, and neither seems to win out. In other words, the composition of the painting is faulty, showing neither selectivity nor artistic judgment. The paint quality is of an ordinary kind, brush-strokes are neither characteristic, nor do they evidence tension, energy, impact. The well-behaved, allover texture and the painter's indifferent treatment of contours lend to the *Philosopher* an air of bourgeois contentment, and suggest a false elegance which is alien to the subject of the painter's attention.

Although Bol worked as an apprentice in Rembrandt's studio, the master's pictorial conception did not communicate itself to the pupil. The colors were not used according to the painting's inner logic, but were simply copied from those dictated by the models. The only thing which can be credited to Bol's painting is a measure of "professional" skill.



OLD WOMAN PARING APPLES • NICHOLAS MAES

NICHOLAS MAES

OLD WOMAN PARING APPLES

LIKE Bol's *Philosopher*, this painting, too, is made of brittle stuff. The aggressively busy pattern of the spinning wheel reduces the figure of the old woman to relative unimportance. All the high-lighted details, including the solitary apple resting on the floor, serve no formal purpose—their existence is purely illustrative, and not plastic. Here again we can say that this pupil of Rembrandt did not possess an artistic intelligence of his own. Although he sat at Rembrandt's elbow when the master painted his *Manoah's Sacrifice* and the *Jewish Bride*, Maes did not understand his teacher's aims.

It must be conceded that some of Rembrandt's own compositions lack particular distinction, but his mature paintings are always faultlessly composed. Maes's work, on the other hand, invariably shows weakness in structure and organization. It shows weakness in its technique, which is hesitant, timid, and lacks even the dash which Bol managed to display at times. In the *Old Woman Paring Apples*, the hesitancy is evident not only in his handling of the brush but also in the application of paint, which is laid on scantily, meagerly, without courage. Conventional as regards color and chiaroscuro, this work has all the attributes of a typical academic genre painting.

RAPHAEL

(1 4 7 3 - 1 5 2 0)

GIULIANO DE' MEDICI

(*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS

(*The Vatican, Rome*)

JACQUES LOUIS DAVID

(1 7 4 8 - 1 8 2 5)

THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

(*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



GIULIANO DE' MEDICI · RAPHAEL

RAPHAEL

GIULIANO DE' MEDICI

SEVERAL almost identical portraits of Giuliano, Duke of Urbino, are in existence. Although like the others, our painting is unsigned, it is generally accepted as a genuine Raphael. We know that Raphael painted the duke around 1515; we also know from very official documents just when the ducal beard was on or off, and so we can fix the date of this picture within the span of Raphael's association with him. But how have investigators satisfied themselves of the painting's authenticity as a work of Raphael, since direct evidence of authorship does not exist? In the case of a painter whose style has been closely imitated by assistants, important contemporaries, and later followers, the origin of a painting—signed or unsigned—is most difficult to trace. The only way whereby credible attribution of seemingly identical pictures can properly be made is by comparing the paintings in question, by closely scrutinizing and weighing the qualities of the various examples. By such a careful comparison the superiority of the example introduced here can be readily established.

How is "quality" (a somewhat obsolescent term) revealed in a painting? It is the *craftsmanship* of a painting which gives it quality. The utmost skill and mastery of the painter's craft are evident in *Giuliano*; skill in design, in muting colors to perfect harmonies, in creating tonal transitions of great subtlety, and in treatment of contours which although not well blended do not appear harsh. These contours never transgress their assigned limits, never trespass on the neighboring planes. The gently harmonized colors and the well-behaved chiaroscuro evidence taste—a most polished and refined taste. Perhaps because of the

taste-refinement, the decorative in the painting dims the emotional. A weakness resulting from a decorative preoccupation is especially noticeable in the arrangement and the painting of the hands. Compared with the vitality of the face, the hands appear to be little more than an indifferent ornament.

All the characteristics of *Giuliano* pertain chiefly to craftsmanship, and craftsmanship has nowadays fallen on bad times. Small wonder, one might say, in this era of perfected technology, when a spray-gun in the hand of a semiskilled worker can effect the gentlest tonal transitions such as would have impressed Leonardo himself. But let us recall that the Renaissance painters were not preoccupied with being "different," nor did they aim to startle the public with acts of artistic legerdemain. No, the sign of grace then was to follow in one's master's footsteps, rather than to disdain tradition. In Raphael's time a personal handwriting in the brushwork of a painter was not particularly sought after; it was rather the smooth finish and an almost mechanically perfect paint-surface that were admired. Because of these imposed limitations there is a lack of excitement in the technical aspects of the painting.

Giuliano's portrait is imbued with great dignity and nobility. Dignity is an attribute of one's state in life and of one's humanity. How, then, are these characteristics objectified in a painting? Naturally they must be represented by means of those instruments of expression upon which the art of painting depends; color and its tonal variations, design and its organization. The beauty of the portrait rests in considerable measure on design. The static arabesques of Giuliano's head and head-gear, and the ponderous breadth of his body, the delineation of the garments and the curtain, attest to Raphael's great understanding of an imposing formal design. This design has the effect of evoking a feeling of serenity and thus accentuating the distinction of the subject. It demonstrates also that Raphael was better as a draftsman than as a painter. In fact, we may say that it is design, more than anything else, that supports his unique position as an artist and elevates the portrait of Giuliano to the rank of a masterpiece.

JACQUES LOUIS DAVID

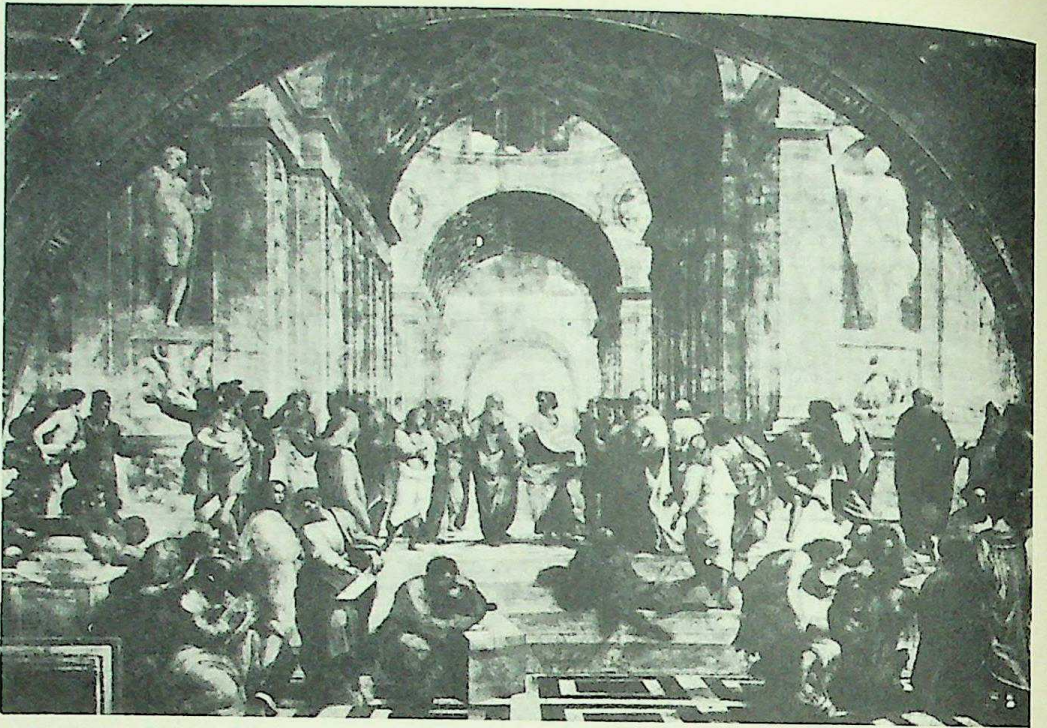
THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

RAPHAEL—THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS

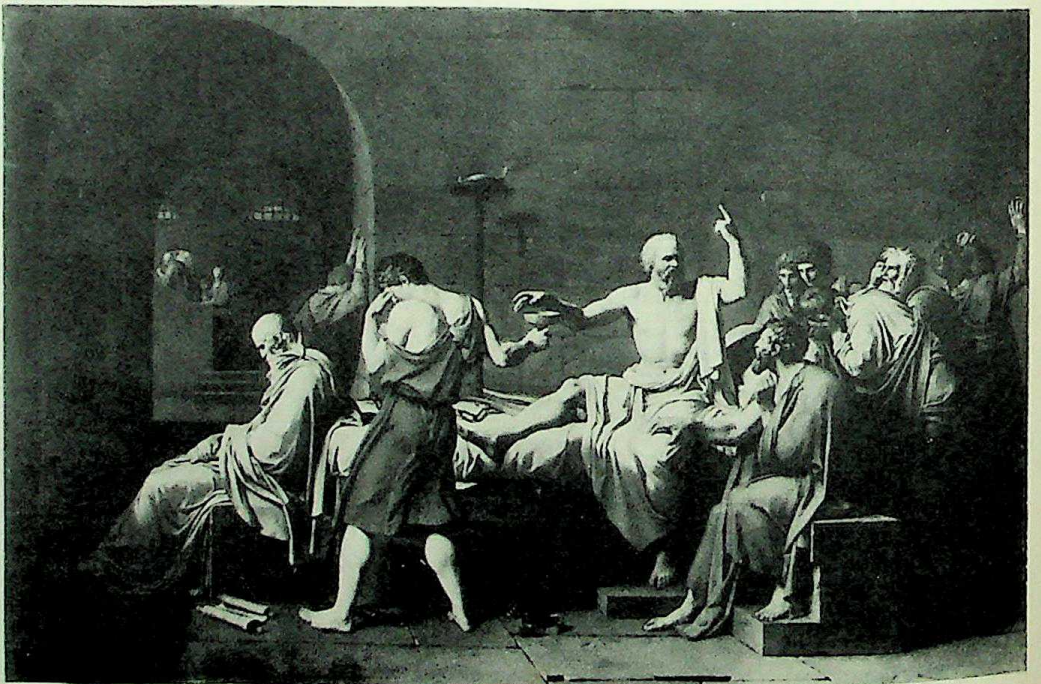
THE CLASSIC has lost much of its erstwhile appeal; we are indifferent today toward the classic muse, but toward the pseudoclassic there is more than mere indifference—there is outright aversion. The nineteenth-century rebirth of the pictorial super-finish so much admired during the high Renaissance appears to us insipid. A technique which aims at obliteration of the artist's handwriting dulls our sensibilities. Patience, assiduousness, cannot outmatch verve, nor meticulousness, keenness of perception. Pedantry is not germane to genius.

In his *The Death of Socrates* the pedantic approach of the painter, by diverting the beholder's attention to a maze of inessentials, destroys the coherence of the composition. The slick enameled surface and the candy-bar colors contribute heavily to the fatuousness of the drama. All of Raphael's coloristic shortcomings are here intensified; transcribed by David, Raphael's somewhat thin color has no more quality and resonance than tin.

As demonstrated in *The Death of Socrates*, David's proficiency in anatomy, classic draftsmanship, and his professional skill in handling oil paints are of no avail, because the element of good taste is beyond his grasp. The staging of Homer's death turns against its director with a vengeance. False sentiment here unwittingly creates a mockery of the heroic, and the overridealization of characters is pushed to a point where



THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS • RAPHAEL



THE DEATH OF SOCRATES • JACQUES LOUIS DAVID

the figures leave the solid ground of reality and turn into Olympic buffoons.

I have purposely paralleled David's work with that of Raphael, whose reputation has—once more—fallen upon bad times. Some modern writers on esthetics, in their ignorance of what makes Raphael a great painter, have endeavored to stamp him as a kind of super-hack, an epitome of all that is academic. Nothing could be more false. Behold *The School of Athens* which, like *The Death of Socrates* aims at Olympian pathos. Here is dignity, power, and epic breadth. Here is diversity of forms, contrapuntal arrangement of masses, all welded into a design of supreme unity and harmony. This is "creative design"—to use a phrase so popular nowadays—utterly void of academic formalism and all that is glib, rhetoric, contrived.

GOYA
(1 7 4 6 - 1 8 2 8)

DON MANUEL OSORIO DE ZUÑIGA
(*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



DON MANUEL OSORIO DE ZUÑIGA • GOYA

GOYA

DON MANUEL OSORIO DE ZUÑIGA

WHEN Goya, then a famous and honored painter, revisited Saragossa, where he had spent the years of his apprenticeship, the owners of some early "original Goyas" asked him to sign these hitherto unsigned paintings. But Goya shook his head with dismay when he examined his one-time "masterpieces"—they were not genuine, said he—and he would not affix his signature to them.

Goya, it is evident, learned to paint the hard way; nothing in his early years augured the great artist in him. And so there is little wonder that at the beginning of his career as a court painter at the age of thirty-eight (when he painted *Don Manuel*) Goya did his best to convince his patrons of his talents.

The portrait of Don Manuel is a demonstration of his freshly attained artistic maturity. Pride in his mastery is shown in all the details of this supremely beautiful painting. To be sure, as compared with the great work of his later years, *Don Manuel* is a rather tight and careful performance. The treatment of the child's hands is somewhat tentative and weak; lack of attention to a mere detail is perhaps responsible for this shortcoming. But when we consider the coloristic treatment of the painting, nothing greater was ever produced by Goya.

The colors and the manner in which the painting is lighted are the portrait's greatest assets. Now, to achieve plasticity by using chiaroscuro, to produce sculptural effects by such means of lighting, is not a feat

of great artistic cunning. But to render an object full, round, and dense by casting on it a frontal light, that is a feat more difficult of accomplishment. In this painting, there is practically an absence of shadows—they all gather on the picture's background (with the exception of the thinly glazed shade at the bottom of the floor, which is an old device used to spotlight the main motif and to suggest space between the beholder and the picture). Since the red dress is not shaded, its plastic appearance is attained by the most subtle changes in the tonal values of the vermilion color. These subtle tonal variations are seen also in the modeling of the face, which presages the art of Renoir.

The contours of the painting have received especially careful attention. Skill, intelligence, and the delight of the painter in his dexterity are all evident. An extraordinarily brilliant technique is also displayed in the treatment of the lace collar, the sash, and the lace cuffs, which are executed with great delicacy and refinement. And yet all these wonders of a masterful technique are superseded by Goya's coloristic approach to his subject. Granted, the glowing vermilion color is in itself a powerful charmer, but the particular value of this vermilion is enhanced and activated by the surrounding colors—the porcelain whiteness of the face, the dull, cool green of the background, the pale yellow of the laces, and the dense yet translucent shadows enshrouding the sinister cats.

In works such as *Don Manuel* we are apt to be captivated by the subject matter or the iconography of the picture—in this instance, by the charming representation of a graceful child surrounded by birds and domestic animals. Aside from the sentimental associations, however, in *Don Manuel* the formal values are alone sufficient to account for the appeal this painting has for us. The illustrative, story-telling features—the cats and the birds—are not only perfectly organized into the general scheme of the composition, they are not merely literal decorative paraphernalia, but they are strange projections of the artist's brooding, tempestuous, almost morbid imagination.

EL GRECO

(1 5 4 8 - 1 6 2 5)

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

(Frick Collection, New York)

DETAIL FROM THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

VIEW OF TOLEDO

(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

DETAIL FROM VIEW OF TOLEDO



THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE · EL GRECO

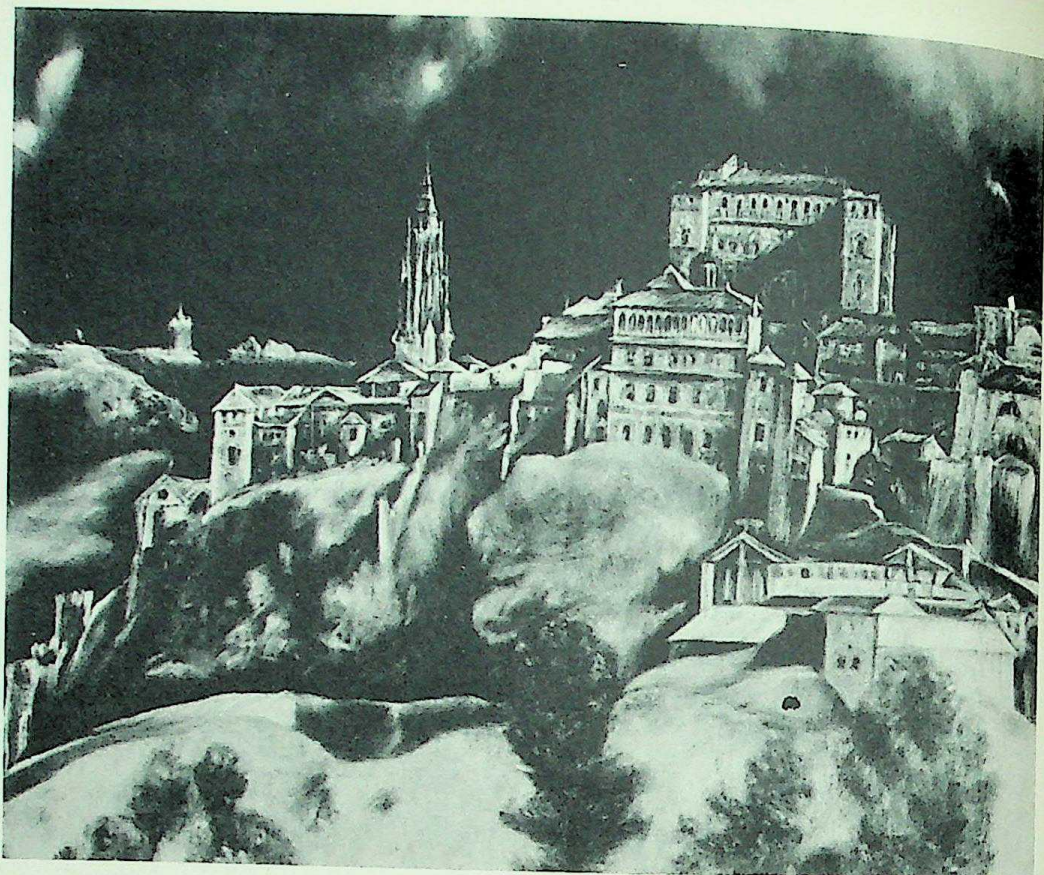
EL GRECO

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

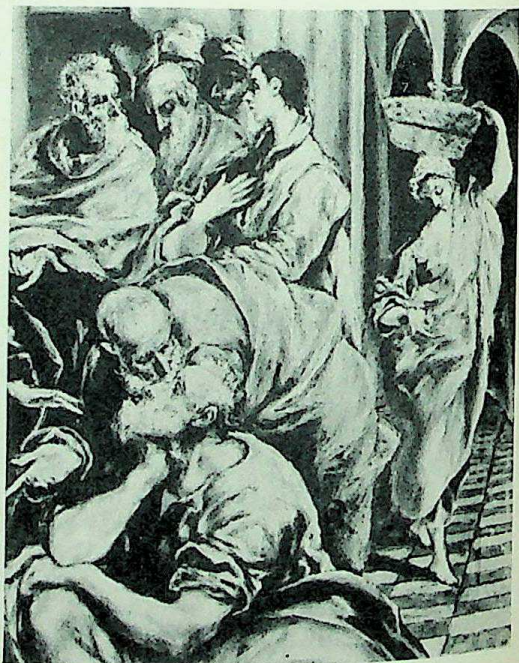
WITHIN a span of forty years, El Greco painted four closely related versions of this subject. In all of them some of the same figures appear. The painting here discussed, which originated around 1600, and the last version, painted some ten years later, have an almost identical figure arrangement. As we see in these examples, El Greco, the ecstatic dreamer, was an excellent and very methodical engineer. He must have kept most meticulous "blueprints" of all his paintings, since even small details in the arrangements of folds, movements of the figures, hands, etc., are faithfully repeated in the several versions.

It is in the nature of oil paintings of the Titian-Tintoretto-El Greco lineage to reach, as a rule, their fullest force of expression when conceived on a large scale. Executed with a powerful brush-stroke in a broad technique, which does not favor attention to minute details, these paintings grow in stature; *The Cleansing of the Temple*, however, is a small canvas, measuring only 16 x 20¼ inches; yet in spite of its small format, it has all the strength inherent in paintings of more imposing dimensions.

At first glance, without close scrutiny, the striking impression of the painting is the luminous, jewel-like quality of the vibrant, oscillating colors, which seem to be of magic origin. As with all the sorcery emanating from a painter's brush, the magic of these colors has a precise explanation. To begin with, they are solidly and uncompromisingly divided into compact masses of fiery and cold hues. Compact positions of localized color oppose one another like contesting phalanxes on a battle-



DETAIL FROM VIEW OF TOLEDO



DETAIL FROM THE CLEANSING
OF THE TEMPLE · EL GRECO

field. The glowing yellows, the glacial green-greys, and the fiery purples repel one another and then reunite in ever-changing clashes, contrasts, and harmonies. The persuasive power of these colors results to a great extent from a knowing and most skillful use of glazes, that is, transparent color passages which derive their luminosity from a light underpainting. This technique accounts largely for the fact that El Greco's paintings appear to be as fresh and brilliant as they must have been four and a half centuries ago.

But besides the physical qualities of these color passages, the manner in which they are juxtaposed accounts for their strength and beauty—a glowing hue harangues another strong color phrase, and then they are all assuaged by monotones, that is, quiet, neutral color areas.

Strong chiaroscuro underscores the depth and height of the color. Theatrically and quite deliberately, one suspects, the sorcerer of illumination let his powers be known to the world with incisive eloquence. Sharp, unmerciful highlights follow velvety darks with little transition, like lightning liberated from a dark cloud. There are no mild warnings of the impending clash, no long-drawn passages of mitigating half tones to connect the heights and the depths of the colors. Melodramatic, ostentatious virtuosity, one might say, and all this it would be with a painter of less talent than El Greco.

The sensibility with which the colors are applied to the canvas is part of the painting's corporeal beauty; they are either glazed, as are all the purples, or applied with impasto. Sometimes the impasto is moderate, as in the greys, sometimes it is densely wrought, as in the yellows, and, underneath the thin glazes, the richly textured surface of the grisaille is all-eloquent. This is *texture* in its most sensitive configuration, informed by the energy of the painter's hand, the rapture of his brush. All over the surface the nervously slashing, ecstatic brush-strokes, now delicate, now forceful to the point of harshness, emphasize the resonant contours. These contours, like sounds of an organ, fade out, swell in intensity, or cut sharply across the canvas with a roaring crescendo.

It is well known that El Greco was a great lover of music; he kept a large group of Italian musicians for his entertainment and elevation of spirit. No wonder there is awareness of "beat" and "pulse" keenly felt in his painting. The composition is built on sweeping rhythms which pervade the entire scene—men, objects, and architecture alike. Rarely, in painting, can we find a conception which suggests musical as well as plastic sensation.

VIEW OF TOLEDO

A traveler who came back from Spain told me that Toledo looks to-day exactly as seen in El Greco's painting. Of course it was the fascination emanating from the painter's conception of Toledo which made this traveler relate the two really dissimilar scenes.

In the *View of Toledo* as in the *Cleansing of the Temple*, the use of light is the picture's triumph. There is no compliance with the rules of classic chiaroscuro. Light is swept, whipped, and slashed all over the picture's surface according to the master's fancy. First it cuts the volumes into clashing, eruptive dissonances; then, led by an inexorable will, it superimposes upon the chaos order and balance.



VIEW OF TOLEDO • EL GRECO

FRANS HALS
(1580-1666)

MALLE BABBE
(*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER
(*Frick Collection, New York*)



MALLE BABBE · FRANS HALS

FRANS HALS

MALLE BABBE

THE name of Frans Hals evokes in us instantly the image of some good-humored, convivial burgher, wine-filled glass in hand, or that of a tramp embracing a beer jug. Frans Hals himself is generally supposed to have been a careless toper; but the truth about the painter's character, as I see it mirrored in his work, differs greatly from the popular tradition. The legend of a giddy Bohemian disreputability was doubtless promulgated by some ill-advised literati with little knowledge of what conditions could or would make a painter a dead shot, so to speak, with his brush. And in the entire history of art there is not a single painter whose spontaneous brush-strokes show greater infallibility. Because Frans Hals was pleased to represent lusty, often inebriate characters, it has been assumed that he must have been closely identified with his subjects. As evidence against him, some fifty court records are often brought forward to prove that he was perpetually in debt to the butcher, the baker, the tailor, etc. All this, however, shows only the painter's disdain of the material side of life, and the callous indifference of the public for one of its very great artists.

When examining the small painting *Malle Babbe*, it is the directness, spontaneity, and bravura of the technique which instantly captivate the beholder. The grasp of the subject is immediate, unerring, for the incisive brushwork explains form and color at once. The mastery of these brush-strokes is demonstrated in the fact that their onrush is never

confused, chaotic; each one is made to count, each one exists only to stress the essential facts and characterizations. Like the thrust of a well-aimed sword, their eloquence is final.

And yet, notwithstanding this infallibility, and the rare faculty of capturing the fleeting moments of life with the first impact of the brush; in spite of the well-conveyed animation of the subject, the penetration of the model's humanity has not reached a profound depth. It appears that the very speed with which the painter went about his work—*Malle Babbe* must have been the fruit of a very few hours—has prevented an intensive study of the subject. The painter simply did not leave himself enough time to unravel the more intimate inner fabric of his models.

PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER

In the *Portrait of a Painter* a different, more deliberate approach is evident. Although an equally heroic realism is displayed, the sketchiness and impetuosity here give way to the painter's search for deeper truth.

Occasionally, superficiality in the work of this painter is the result of a limited imagination; Frans Hals's imagination is not always buoyant. But the physical beauty, the craftsmanship of these paintings, is of the highest order. The handling of the blacks and greys—the most outstanding colors of his palette—is almost without parallel in the entire history of painting, and the treatment of laces, clothes, and other paraphernalia displays an economy of means which manifests a self-contained power rather than the forced intention of all his imitators. Another extraordinary feature of Frans Hals's portraits, which sets him apart from most other figure painters, is his treatment of hands; it seems to me that just in this particular instance imagination is the least and observation the most important faculty; for instantaneous visualization and virtuosity of the brush are here the all-deciding factors.



PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER • FRANS HALS

PIETER BRUEGHEL

(1525? - 1569)

PEASANTS DANCING

(*Museum of Art History, Vienna*)

HUNTERS IN SNOW

(*Museum of Art History, Vienna*)

HARVESTERS

(*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

JAN STEEN

(1626 - 1679)

PEASANTS QUARRELING OVER CARDS

(*Picture Gallery, Dresden*)

PIETER AERTSEN

(1508 - 1575)

POULTRY DEALERS

(*Ducal Museum, Brunswick*)



PEASANTS DANCING · PIETER BRUEGHEL

PIETER BRUEGHEL

PEASANTS DANCING

ONLY half a century ago the name of Brueghel had no particular resonance. He was considered a humorist, an illustrator of vulgar bucolic life, his nickname was "Peasant" Brueghel. The Gothic in his work offended the refined taste schooled in the classic as the measure of the beautiful. And no wonder, for his work is indeed lacking in the formal dignity which was part of the fabulous Renaissance scene; or at least its dignity is of a different kind. Brueghel types are not expressive of classic humanism, of its esthetic predilections, its love for the serene, the well-proportioned; his compositions are Flemish and truly Gothic; of the kind to which Michelangelo referred with contempt as provincial, barbaric, crowded with unessential details. Gothic, it should be remembered, had stood since the time of Raphael (who used it in this sense) for "barbaric." The grotesque, the odd, the macabre, is its lifeblood, and the connoisseurs of many past generations did not cherish these qualities. Surely the Gothic carries vitality surpassing anything which can be found in the classic, but the Gothic, seeking the arch of heaven, gravitates toward purgatory. And Brueghel, if not always purgatory-bent, had a keen sense of the ever-present, ever-watchful Satan. His humor does not come off smoothly. There is a bitter tang to it—quite unlike the humor of Jan Steen who was also a narrator of rustic vicissitudes.

In Brueghel's work the immediate yields to the infinite, the particular



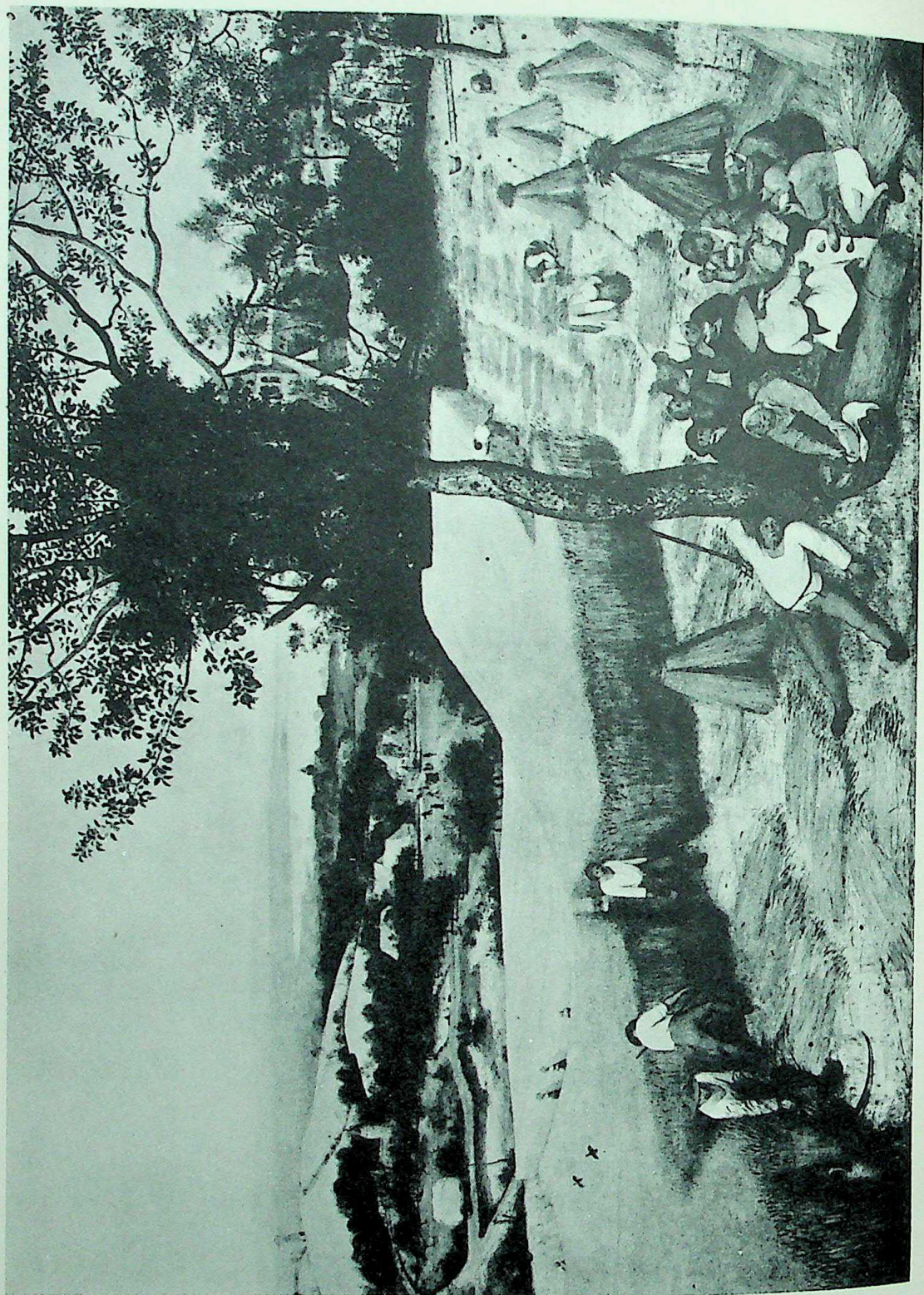
HUNTERS IN SNOW · PIETER BRUEGHEL

to the universal. His peasant is more than a type; although he retains his outer surface, the surface deepens into the essence of all living creatures. His peasants are true to nature, their local humus and particular pattern are always preserved; no attempt is made to symbolize or allegorize the subject; yet, put through the alembic of the artist's mind, even the vulgar is transported to the sphere of the wonderful; even the trivial achieves monumental proportions. Herein, it appears, lies the particular genius of this painter, who is not after the symbolic, the allegorical; who faithfully depicts reality, yet lifts the factual from the realm of the ephemeral and transmutes it into a timeless epos of human destiny. The timeless epos of Brueghel's world is charged with a diabolic melancholia; above and about the animal life of the peasants lies the heavy hand of fate; the mirth senses a last reckoning; the wickedness, retribution; and the unresolved love, hate, and despair, a final redemption.

Like Brueghel's peasant, the creature close to the ground becomes a mirror of universal forces and his landscapes are no longer particular city or country vistas; they do not represent, as it were, motifs from Woodstock, New York, or Gloucester, Massachusetts—they are visions of some miraculous planet. Although Brueghel lived in the lowlands of Flanders all his life, one short journey over the Alps to Italy and Sicily gave him the ever-present dream of the wondrous mountain passes, the rocky coast lines, the broad streams forcing their course through valleys into the uttermost sea.

HUNTERS IN SNOW

Many of the motifs are undoubtedly authentic and literal, but the landscape on the whole is pure invention. Here is the spirit of winter, of snow, of cold grey distances where enchantment lies hidden on hazy horizons. The breath of Eternity hovers over the scene. The people—hunters and skaters—the hounds, and crows, the kitchen crew busily fanning the fire, do not bring the majesty of the frozen world to our scale and measure, they do not carry it down to earth, nor evoke for



HARVESTERS · PIETER BRUEGHEL

us a sense of the homely, the familiar; rather, they deepen the impersonal, the detachment of the haunting distances, the mystery of the dormant fields and trees, the threat of the ghostly cliffs. *Hunters in Snow*, one of the greatest landscape paintings of all time, is perhaps the supreme test of the painter's masterly sense of composition and subtle use of color. No histrionic stunts, no brilliant effects are here displayed to please the eye of the beholder. A variation of delicate incorporeal greys and pale greens which fade as they recede, a touch of ochre here and there, the gloomy dark of the rigid trees, and the glowing tongue of the open-hearth fire, these are the colors of the scene. Here, as in most of his compositions, the foreground is taken up without transition by the distance, which mellows into a cadence of receding hills as they fall back into the picture's depth. It is all as simple as a child's picture book, but the simplicity is the end form of boundless wisdom.

Although mention is often made of Brueghel's originality, I consider this of lesser importance in his work. In landscape painting, similar tendencies can be found in his predecessors, Quentin Massys, and Joachim Patinir, and in the figures of his early work the spirit of Hieronymus Bosch reverberates.

HARVESTERS

Aside from its technical subtleties which alone would mark this painting as a great work of art—subtleties seen in the treatment of the wheat-field, the foliage, the cluster of trees, and the distant sea—the spirit of the keen strategist drives the composition ahead with a mighty gesture. The planes roll off into space, winding and interwinding in straight lines, curves, and parabolas, and all is held together by the moulded sweep of the wheatfield which cuts obliquely across the foreground. The figures are not an afterthought, a staffage, they are part of the landscape. Nevertheless, they rate only as accessories to the composition, charming details of no great consequence.

JAN STEEN

PEASANTS QUARRELING OVER CARDS

Here are the solid jokers, the raucous country yokels. Merry they are, but their ebullience is flaccid, their temper is beer-propelled. Such is our impression when contemplating this rustic scene. And how is the impression brought about? It isn't by the picture's poor artistry. On the contrary, there is animation and verve in the handling of the brush, there is skill, gusto, wit. Although the concept of the painting is lacking in originality, it is not without imagination. What reduces the *Peasants Quarreling Over Cards* to the level of an illustration is the painter's incapacity to avoid caricature. Brueghel's art teems with the grotesque, Jan Steen's is populated by caricatures.

The grotesque and the caricature are twin sisters, yet so totally unlike that it seems it must be the element of taste which determines the painter's attitude, or the depth of his artistic insight, or perhaps both.

The grotesque and the caricature employ exaggeration and deformities in equal measure and push all issues to absurd conclusions. It is, then, not the degree of aberration from the normal which determines the classification, but the method of approach. Caricature stresses—intentionally or not—the comical, the ludicrous, the doleful. Its means are always external. The grotesque is the condensation of the weird, the dramatic, the sinister; by means of it the hidden, often tragic element of the soul finds expression.

There is nothing of the grotesque in the quarreling peasants, merely poor taste, which breeds the trivial. Notwithstanding the fine paint quality, the picture is bogged down in the literal, anecdotal, humorously illustrative.



PEASANTS QUARRELING OVER CARDS · JAN STEEN



POULTRY DEALERS · PIETER AERTSEN

PIETER AERTSEN

POULTRY DEALERS

In the painting by Pieter Aertsen, a contemporary of Brueghel, the faults are just as heavy although their nature is different. The concept is conventional, originality entirely lacking. In spite of vigor in pictorial rendering, the effects of the composition are weakened by the indiscriminate arrangement of the motifs. Diligently the painter stuffs into his picture all that the available area can take, and for no other reason, it seems, than to impress the patron. The pointedly folksy air of a Jan Steen is here absent; Aertsen imbues his rustics with Renaissance solemnity, gives them a false grandeur, gentle breeding. The former leads us down to earth, the latter toward an alien estheticism—and both fail to produce great art.

MATHIAS GRÜNEWALD
(1475?–1528)

DETAIL FROM CRUCIFIXION

NATIVITY

RESURRECTION

DETAIL FROM NATIVITY

(From the Isenheim Altar at Colmar, Alsace)



DETAIL FROM CRUCIFIXION • MATHIAS GRÜNEWALD

MATHIAS GRÜNEWALD

CRUCIFIXION

NATIVITY

RESURRECTION

NOBLE craftsmanship is the sine qua non of all great works of art, according to my doctrine. Of this my readers will by now be fully aware. In introducing Mathias Grünewald, however, I bring forward the exception which proves the rule, for his craftsmanship never reached the perfection of Dürer's and, on the whole, it was perhaps outranked by that of Lucas Cranach. And yet, as a painter, Grünewald had more power than these illustrious contemporaries of his—perhaps more power than any German painter of any time.

Grünewald's art was not fully comprehended during his life. Melanchthon, one of the most enlightened men of the period, mentioned him in 1531 with respect, but without having grasped the singular quality of his paintings. Although Grünewald's fame did not suffer the oblivion of certain other great artists, the magnitude of his visions and the significance of his ideas were not fully recognized until our day.

Two elements account for his extraordinary achievements—color and originality of conception. Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to refer to his poetic imagination than to his originality, since originality can go hand in hand with sobriety or even prosaicism—note Cézanne, for example. But Grünewald's art expresses the very opposite of sobriety; it is charged with ecstasy and pathos of the rarest kind. Of course,

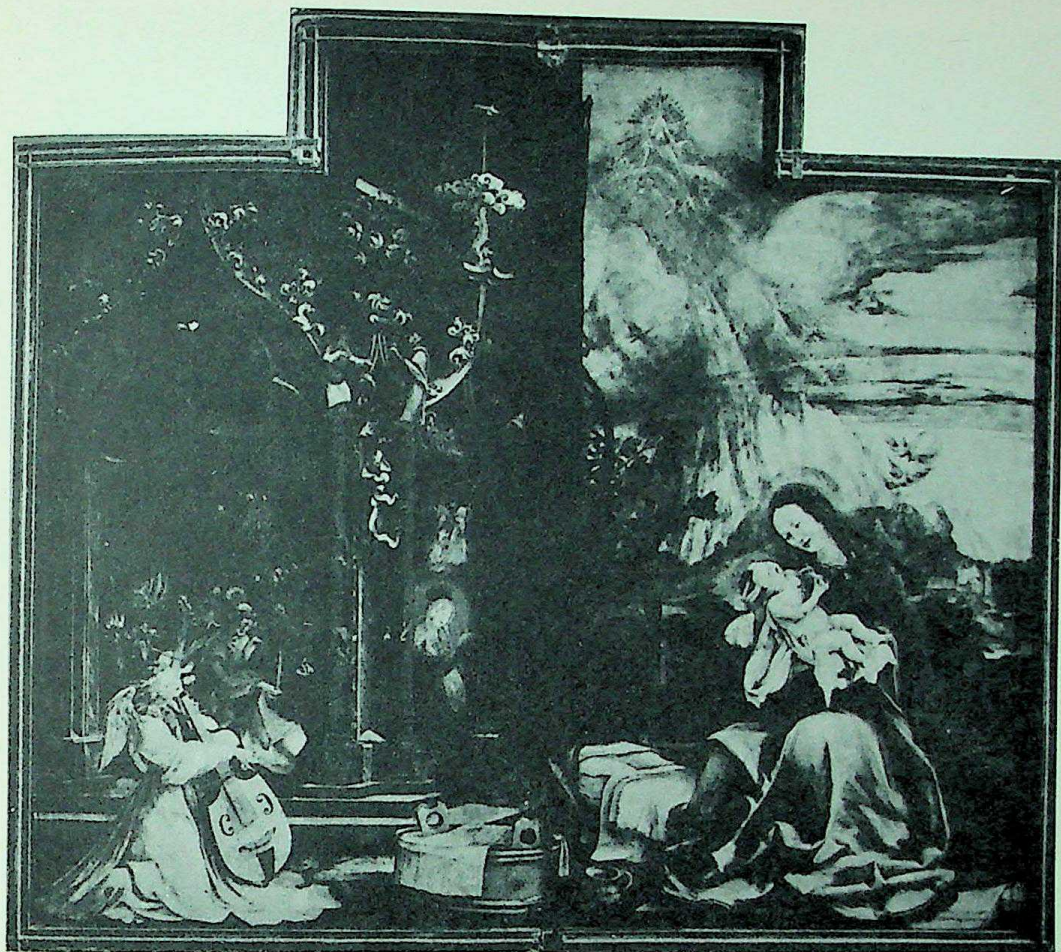
there are other painters who exalt the emotional—El Greco for one—and we can safely say that the activating element which governs the emotional force is the same in both these masters—a preoccupation with suffering; yet there is a fundamental difference between them. Both are ostentatious, in a sense, but Grünewald's pain is raw; El Greco's suffering, on the other hand, is always marked by an air of worldly elegance.

Grünewald glorifies and dramatizes suffering as no other painter has done. Never has the representation of the Savior's agony been intensified to such a pitch without once falling into the obvious and melodramatic.

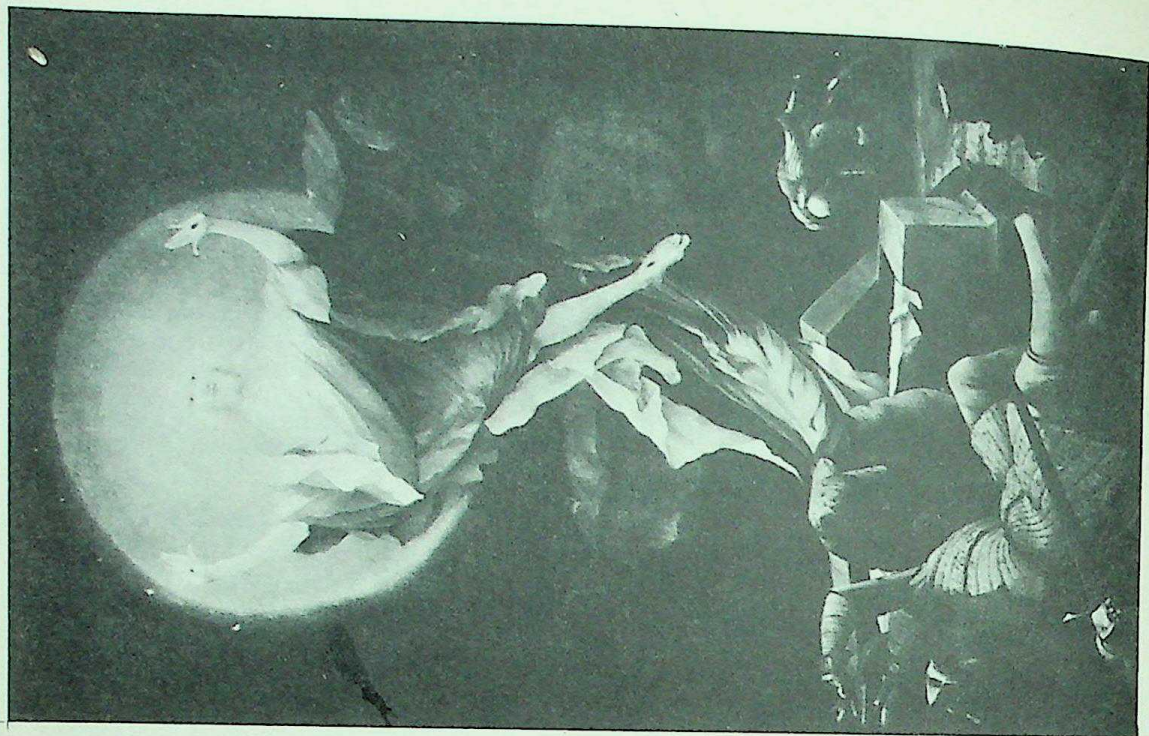
The painter is not greatly concerned with objective truth and the presentation of facts; what he gives us is his feeling about the facts, and to do this he conditions color and form as his feeling dictates, thus he is not a classic but rather an expressionistic painter. To be sure, he had a good knowledge of classic Italian art but he did not always follow its principles. He did not seek perfection and beauty of form, the eternal quest of the Renaissance men; he reveled in extremes, searched the bottom of despair for the greater glory of his vision.

To reach the highest intensity of feeling, Grünewald had often to discard the canons of classic art, the realistic conceptions of anatomy and perspective, and here his Gothic inheritance led his pictorial concepts to a new freedom. Strangely, the "new" in this freedom was already an anticipation of the Baroque.

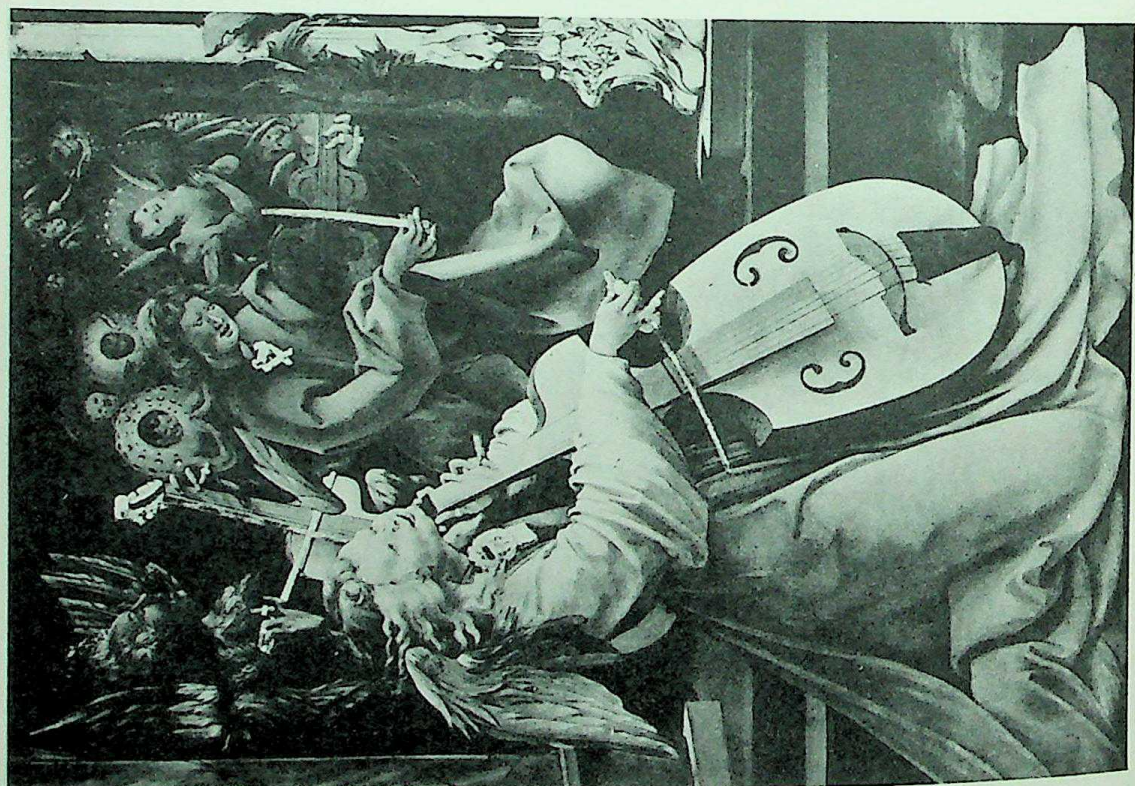
The depth of his emotions and his creative urge could not, it seems, find adequate expression in secular subjects. The only paintings left by him are those telling the story of Christ, and the one major work upon which his fame rests is an altarpiece consisting of ten separate paintings at a village church in Isenheim near Colmar in Alsace. Because Isenheim is off the beaten path very few people have had a personal experience with Grünewald's work; that is why his name has not become a household word like Raphael and Leonardo.



NATIVITY · MATHIAS GRÜNEWALD



RESURRECTION : MATHIAS GRÜNEWALD



DETAIL FROM NATIVITY · MATHIAS GRÜNEWALD

THE NATIVITY—TECHNIQUE, DESIGN, COLOR

There is nothing modern in the treatment of this painting, modern in the sense of an El Greco technique with a tempestuous orchestration of contours and freedom in the handling of the brush. There is none of the textural sensuousness so amply evident in the works of Titian and Rembrandt, nor is there any exploitation of chiaroscuro effects. The delineations are kept in the medieval tradition. The sharp, crisp, often dry accents, the careful glazings and the glowing colors painted on monotonous or grisaille show that Grünewald was still harking back to the older tempera school tradition. In true Gothic style, even gold foil is used to simulate the effect of jewelry. At times his technique shows certain crudities and a want of polish occasionally encountered in provincial painters; it lacks many of the niceties and atelier sophistications so avidly practised in the centers of artistic culture. However, by reason of Grünewald's genius, this rather plain technique does not detract from the greatness of his paintings. On the contrary, it would seem that, in order to produce a design such as his, a certain naïveté and lack of virtuosity are necessary. He had to struggle hard and tenaciously to give form to his images, changing the original plan repeatedly as the painting progressed. A faculty for a quick realization of his intentions would, perhaps, have divested it of its inviolability, deprived it of its power to convince.

Grünewald's power to convince rests in great measure on the originality of his designs, and on the spatial organization of his compositions. His idea of space is truly Gothic; he organizes the masses of his composition with little regard for perspective requirements, guided, as he is, by a divine feeling for musicality rather than by reason. The elements of the design are used for creating a free poetic association and high emotional tension. Like the design, so also the color is entirely directed toward heightening and reflecting his inner excitement and his visionary dreams.

When discussing Grünewald's color, it is appropriate to point to the changes which have taken place in the use of color during the development of oil painting technique. With the perfecting of this technique, pure, primary colors have lost much of their importance because painters have acquired the habit of using broken colors (mixtures of several colors). Such colors are eminently suitable for creating tonal values; the original intensity of the color is modified, often to a point where its identity is lost, for all broken colors are related to one another by virtue of their comparative neutrality. They are easy to use, easy to look at; they are not likely to offend. Not so the pure colors. Commitments in pure color such as seen in the work of Grünewald hold real danger; nothing is easier than to fall into the garish, barbaric, chromolike; nothing can more quickly hurt the refined taste than a rainbow display of unadulterated color. How easily can these colors quarrel and fight and upset the balance of a composition! No wonder that the emotions of the beholder sometimes suffer considerable wear and tear in the face of full-blown colors and that he prefers to seek refuge in "tonal values."

Grünewald does not hesitate to use the full impact of brilliant glazes and glowing hues of every color at his disposal with limitless abandon and audacity. With these colors he creates in the *Nativity* an ethereal music which permeates the entire composition. It would seem that it is not the angels in the painting who make the music but the colors which radiate from and around them.

In Grünewald's *Resurrection* the head of Christ is all eternal light and glory; not the slightest vestige of a shade dims its celestial brightness; it is flooded with an incandescent aura of pink, gold, and violet. The drapery ascends in ripples on the radiating light into billowing space, and in swirling motion the folds envelop the figure like the petals of exotic flowers. Contrasted with the tranquility of the resurrected Lord, chaos and infernal storm rip the jagged, tortured forms below.

LEONARDO DA VINCI
(1 4 5 2 - 1 5 1 9)

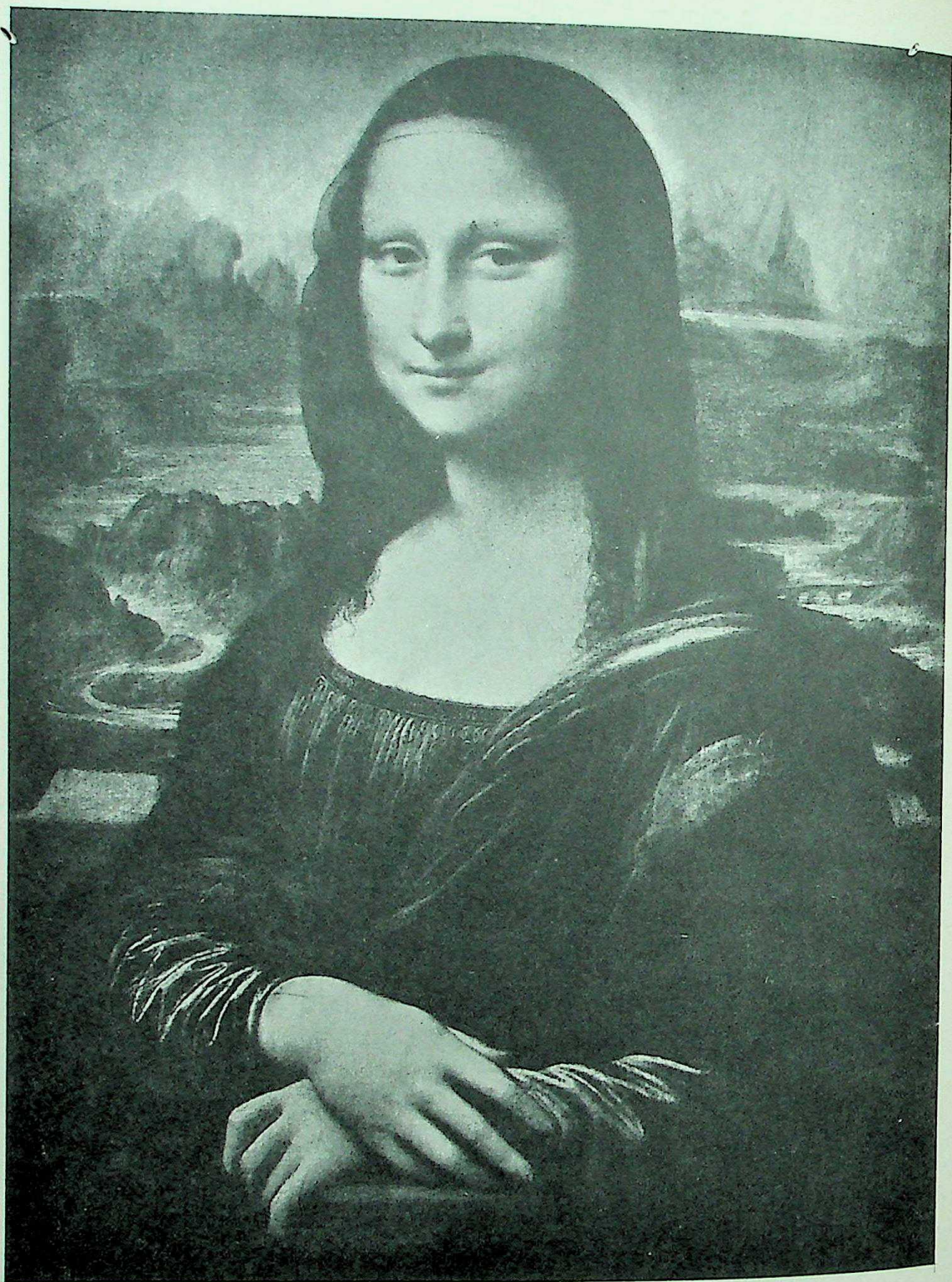
MONA LISA
(*The Louvre, Paris*)

LORENZO DI CREDI
(1 4 5 9 - 1 5 3 7)

MADONNA, CHILD, AND THE INFANT JOHN
(*Picture Gallery, Dresden*)

GUIDO RENI
(1 5 7 5 - 1 6 4 2)

DEIANIRA ABDUCTED BY THE CENTAUR NESSUS
(*The Louvre, Paris*)



MONA LISA • LEONARDO DA VINCI

LEONARDO DA VINCI

MONA LISA

"BECAUSE Leonardo made models of machines, dug canals, built fortifications, and dissipated half of his art-power in capricious ingenuities, we have many anecdotes of him but no picture of importance on canvas." And, referring to Guido Reni, Mr. John Ruskin, the famous Victorian connoisseur, continues: "He's a man ten times as great as Leonardo."

"By looking at this picture, whoever wishes to see how closely art can imitate nature can learn at once what can be done." These are Vasari's words on *Mona Lisa*.

As to the opinion of the "great masses" on this painting, they are well known. During the past century it was considered the highest achievement in painting, unequaled by anything else in the annals of art.

Let us now examine these various appraisals and see what they stand for. Ruskin's position can be understood only when it is realized that he, like practically all the lettered men of his time was afflicted with the corrupt Victorian taste. It was almost inevitable that, surrounded by monstrosities of fashion, architecture, and "traditional art," the scale of balance in esthetics should have gone out of kilter.

And the great masses? By the compulsion of genius, they are sometimes drawn to great art, but they usually give wrong reasons for the attraction. Their sentiments for *Mona Lisa* are based on flagrantly false premises; it is the smile, always dubbed "enigmatic," which invariably

takes the people's fancy. The associative connotations of that smile have, alas, reduced *Mona Lisa*—for the indiscriminating—to a chromo ideal for all time and put her on millions of calendars. This enigma of a goddess incarnate, the symbolic and secret meaning ascribed to the painting are, of course, all nonsense, although they may have provoked soul-stirring sentiments at one time. These factors have nothing whatever to do with the true values of the painting. The origin of the smile, which had become fashionable at the time when Leonardo was working in the shop of his master, Verocchio, is not in the least mysterious—it comes straight from archaic Grecian sculpture. When Leonardo painted the smile on *Mona Lisa's* face, it was already a trite and conventionalized mode.

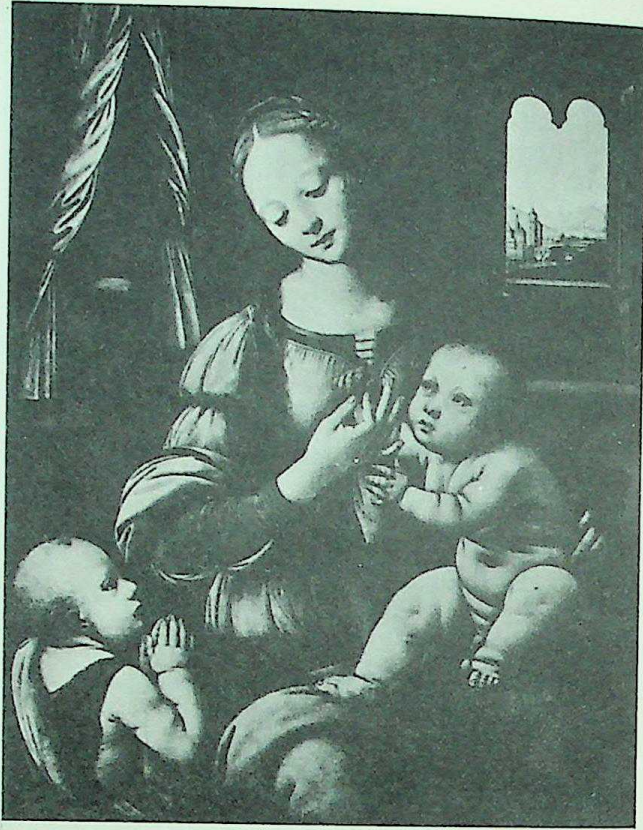
As to Vasari's statement concerning Leonardo's imitating nature, "imitating nature" can mean a dozen and more things to as many people, because the aspect of nature is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder. Here we may recall what Boccaccio had to say about Giotto: "There is nothing in nature that he could not imitate so well as to deceive our very senses, making them imagine that his painting was the very thing itself." Now, who, today, would ever agree that Giotto's pictures are close to nature!

Is *Mona Lisa* close to nature? By no means. It is more akin to a dream than to reality—the figure as well as the background. This background is, according to many scholars, a true representation of the upper Engadine Valley as seen from the high slopes of Muottas-Murail. However, I believe the figure and the landscapes to be wholly of Leonardo's invention. The cascade of mountains, valleys, and streams, although they were most likely recollections of scenes he had visited, had in time become dimmed by distance, and eventually they emerged as poetic inventions.

Neither the design of the figure nor the landscape—although both are of majestic beauty—is original. Conceptions such as these were known a generation before Leonardo's time. And yet, this fact does not detract

from the greatness of the work, a greatness recognized from the first, and for reasons which are still valid in our day. It is the *sfumato* technique that accounts for the originality of this painting and its atmospheric effects. Never before—or after—Leonardo did this technique produce lights so fragile and shadows so transparent and evanescent. The weightless appearance of these half-veiled lights and translucent shadows can be realized from the fact that no photographic reproductions give a true impression of the original. In fact, no two photographs of *Mona Lisa* are alike; they all differ, more or less, in the density of the chiaroscuro (*sfumato*) effect upon which the expression of the face relies.

Sfumato means smoke in Italian, and points to the delicacy of transition from dark to light. Like smoke rising in a dense cloud and thinning imperceptibly until it fades out and merges with the clear light, so this fade-out is created, as it were, by means of lucid veils; they absorb all harsh light, mellow the definition of contours, and deprive all matter of its gross body and directness. It is difficult for us to understand how a delicate gradation of light and shade can evoke such praise, but Leonardo's singular achievement in this respect has not been equaled in all the history of art.



LORENZO DI CREDI

MADONNA, CHILD, and the INFANT JOHN

•Outward niceties, attractiveness achieved by means of superficiality, will not elevate a painting to the rank of a masterpiece. The physical lineaments of great works can be imitated by lesser hands but, lacking the impulse from within, the results will be weak, stereotyped, sensationless. In other words, in the absence of originality, the creative turns into the academic, invention becomes cliché.

In Lorenzo di Credi's *Madonna*, a painfully belabored formula finds its ultimate burial place. The hardened academician tries in vain to evoke the sweetness of Fra Angelico, the sfumato mysteries of Leonardo, the grace of Botticelli.



GUIDO RENI

DEIANIRA ABDUCTED BY THE CENTAUR NESSUS

Guido Reni attempts, too, and in vain, to resurrect the classic ideal. A cold realism defies the beautician's efforts to imbue his subjects with divinity—it merely transforms the mythological scene into a confectioner's creation. A total lack of originality undoes whatever the manual skill could produce. The painter's vapid imagination is not redeemed by the accumulation of perfected school knowledge, because in art, as we know, the power to convince is not contingent upon the presentation of facts as they appear in nature.

TITIAN
(1 4 7 7 - 1 5 7 6)

MAN WITH RED CAP
(*Frick Collection, New York*)

VENUS AND THE LUTE PLAYER
(*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

PIERO DI COSIMO
(1 4 6 2 - 1 5 2 1)

A HUNTING SCENE
(*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



MAN WITH RED CAP • TITIAN

TITIAN

IN ATTEMPTING to understand and justly evaluate the classic today a major resistance seems to stand in our way. In the work of Titian, and of other painters of similar thought-direction, it is the classic principle which confronts us first, since in him (as in Raphael and a few others) these principles are most highly developed. Of course there are variations of the classic, modifications and aberrations, but in the art of Titian the classic is the heart and the root. Of Raphael it may be said that he could challenge even Titian as the classic painter *par excellence*; his drawing, no doubt, was superior, although we would hardly subscribe to Michelangelo's statement that "Titian would have been a great painter—if he had drawn better." Michelangelo, it appears, did not understand Titian's superiority as a painter. He, the sculptor, did not perceive that Titian gives us the very essence of pictorial conception, in this by far surpassing Raphael. In such a conception drawing must always, of necessity, remain subordinate to the pictorial.

At the moment, the classic in Titian is of minor interest, for, as already noted, the classic is now rated low in the scale of esthetic values. The bastardization and banalization of the classic has succeeded in debasing the measured and the harmonious to slick magazine cover affairs. Moreover, the classic style—perhaps because it aspires to perfection—is of low vitality; it is lacking in the dramatic. Classic art cannot very well by its nature luxuriate in the emotional, because all exaggerations, distortions, and violence, run counter to the geometric prin-

ciple which governs it. Consider, for example, the smoothly flowing form sequences of the Greek sculptures of the Golden Age. They all suggest geometric equations. The variations of planes, plastic modulations, growth and attenuation, are in such equations precalculable entities. A certain volume of the figure's head determines at once the figure's size. A certain length of forearm demands a corresponding measure of the foot, and so on. Thus, when contemplating classic art, we miss the pleasurable shock resulting from the unexpected. To quote Kenyon Cox: "The classic spirit is the disinterested search for perfection, it is the love of clearness and reasonableness and self-control . . . it asks of a work of art, not that it shall be novel or effective, but that it shall be fine and noble. It seeks not merely to express individuality of emotion, but to express disciplined emotion and individuality restrained by law."

Individuality restrained by law is at once the strength and weakness of the classic mode. By giving the artist a set of codified principles, it restrains him to an extent from relying on his own ocular and emotional experience. How far these canons can go toward stultifying the minds of painters not blessed with great gifts can be seen in the work of David, for example (see the section on Raphael).

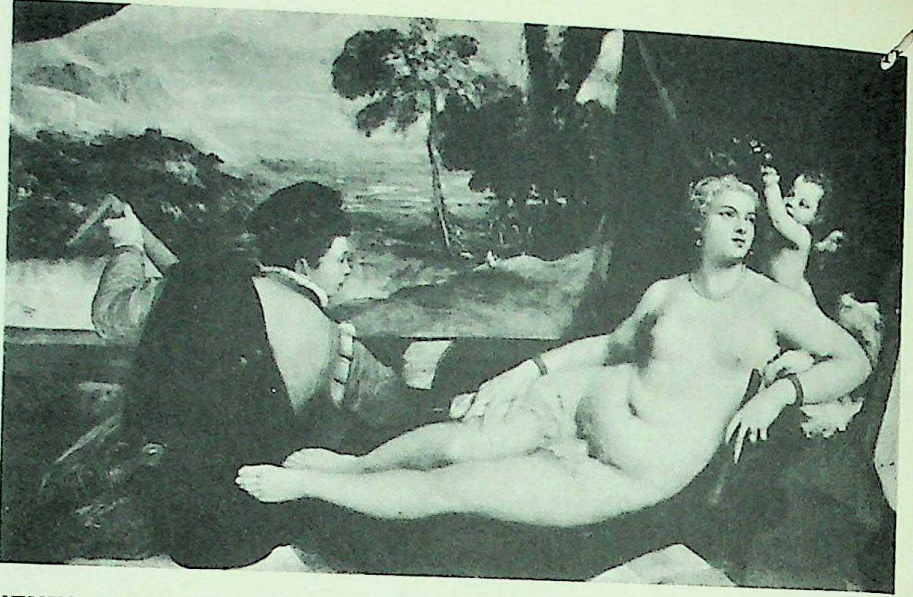
Individuality restrained by law does not bewitch our senses quickly. It is the grotesque more than anything else which captivates the imagination of art-conscious contemporaries, and the grotesque is predicated on distortions of form. That is why an El Greco or a Grünewald, although little appreciated for several centuries, are closer to us today than is Titian. At times pleasures derived from the harmonious are weak intoxicants. Aside from the social and psychological reasons which account for the classic style, there is no denying that most of its possibilities have been exhausted by endless repetition, and that what remains consists, for the most part, of formalized schemes, trappings devoid of inner life and metaphoric meaning.

MAN WITH RED CAP

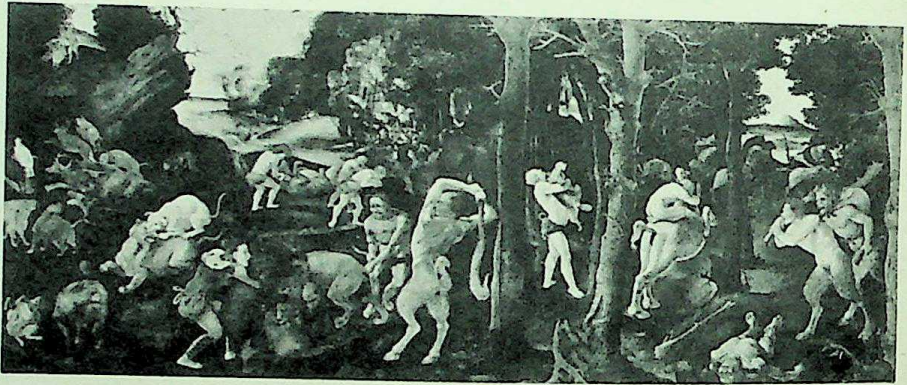
Paintings such as this one were the source whence Velazquez, Goya, and Manet drew their inspiration. In fact, this painting can be looked upon as a standard by which all kindred esthetic endeavors can be measured. When looking at the best works of Manet, for example, we shall always weigh in mind how it compares with the work of his great predecessors.

Classic realism here displays the best features and attributes of serenity. It is an *ideal* portrait; Titian, we realize, borrowed the external likeness of his model and recast it in his own manner. It was Titian's artistic personality which ennobled the subject of his representation. Power without excess, persuasiveness through reticence, nobility without pomp—these are expressed by the colors; firmness, stability, monumentality are present—and these are transmitted to us by the linear arrangement.

Although it is an early work, already it foreshadows plein air-ism. The values in the flesh tints rely on delicate articulation of tonal nuances rather than on the use of plastic chiaroscuro, which is almost entirely absent. Goya's *Don Manuel*, although created more than two and a half centuries later, does not represent any advance in painting beyond Titian's *Man With Red Cap*. In the treatment of the fur, the garments, the glove, there is the very essence of the pictorial. Comprehensive handling of the masses, omission of all but essential effects and details (which could hardly be executed with the broad sweep of a large brush), harmony of will and purpose—these are the virtues realized in this painting.



VENUS AND THE LUTE PLAYER . TITIAN



PIERO DI COSIMO

A HUNTING SCENE

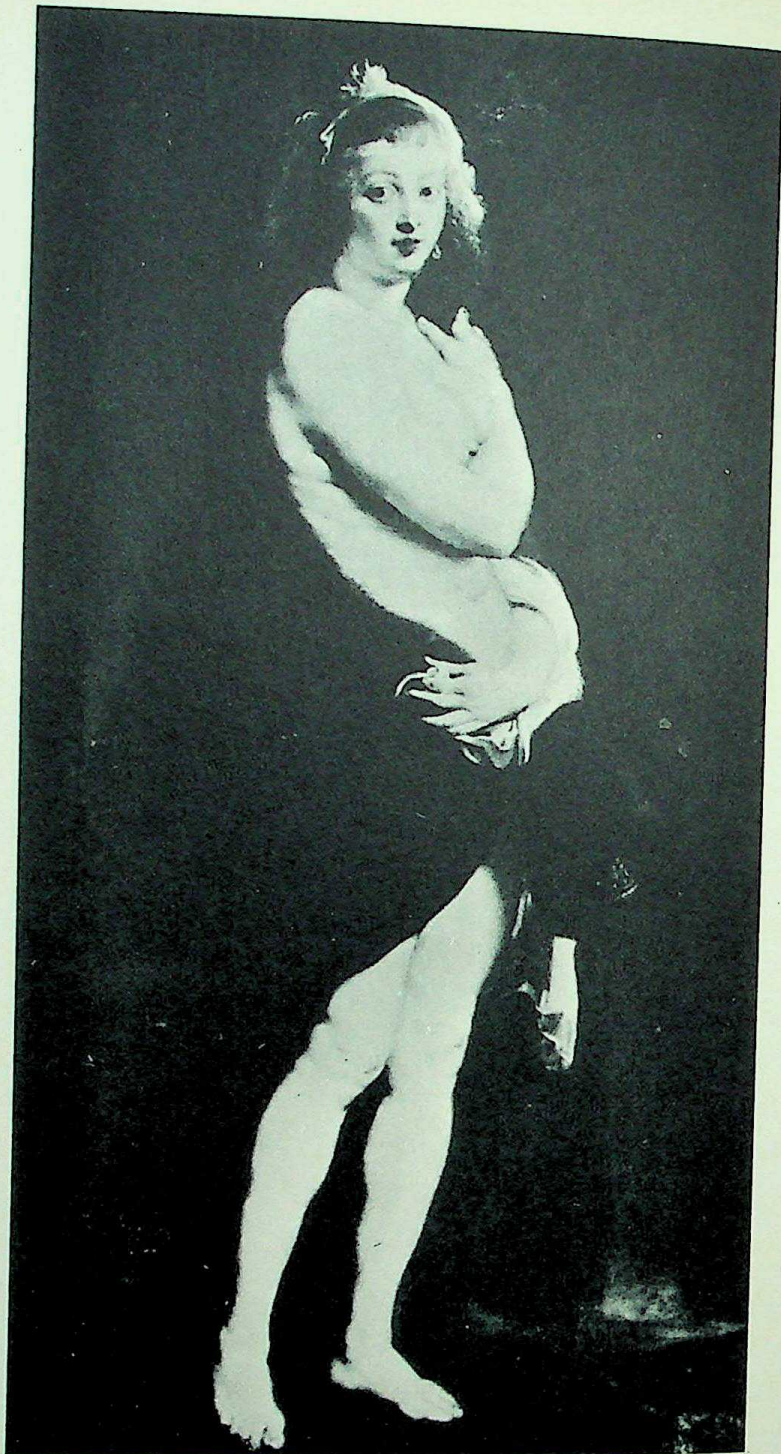
In a few paintings such as *A Hunting Scene*, Di Cosimo, a contemporary of Titian, forgets the traditional obligation to the classic. The postulates of esthetic principles fade in the face of nature. A note of the grotesque, the bizarre, brings these paintings at once within the orbit of our appreciation.

PETER PAUL RUBENS
(1 5 7 7 - 1 6 4 0)

HELENE FOURMENT IN FUR
(*Museum of Art History, Vienna*)

JACOPO JORDAENS
(1 5 9 3 - 1 6 7 8)

THE KING DRINKS
(*The Louvre, Paris*)



HELENE FOURMENT IN FUR • RUBENS

PETER PAUL RUBENS

HELENE FOURMENT IN FUR

ON September 13th, 1621, Rubens wrote to one A. Turnbull, who was acting on behalf of Sir Dudley Carleton, English Ambassador at The Hague: "I am quite willing that the picture painted for my Lord Carleton be returned to me, and that I should paint another hunting piece less terrible . . . making abatement as is reasonable for the amount already paid and the new picture to be entirely of my own hand. . . ."

No doubt the great artist aimed to please. Unlike Rembrandt, the cosmopolitan Rubens, cavalier and elegant courtier, did not disdain to meet the wishes of his employers halfway. Does this imply that the artist suffered from a character weakness which might have impeded his talents and lowered the standard of his work? Not at all. "When his judgment is superior to his work," said Leonardo, "the artist never ceases improving—if the love of gain does not retard his progress." It should follow then that a disregard for gain should further the growth of genius. This, of course, is not always true. Titian, Michelangelo, Rubens, among other great painters, keenly appreciated material rewards. Moral ascendancy, it seems, is unrelated to the powers that generate esthetic values. Moral and esthetic preoccupations dwell on different planes, each having a different field of operation. At any rate, probity is not a proxy for talent. The question whether a painter should be money-minded is decided for him by the nature of his talent, as well as the pattern of his personality. Within the compound of his talent,

two elements—facility and versatility—make it possible for him to comply with the taste—usually dubious taste—of his employers. A man of versatile talent will apply himself in many ways other than his very own. A painter who is not facile will escape many a pitfall, not because of his reluctance to sacrifice principle to circumstance, but because by the nature of his talent there is an inability to conform.

Indeed, there are a great many bad Rubens', done by his hand, some just retouched by him, and some which, although they carry his authentic signature, never felt the imprint of his brush. But there are Rubens' which, regardless of our present-day predilection for one or the other mode of esthetic expression, are comparable to the finest paintings our civilization can boast.

But it is useless to assure our contemporaries of the great esthetic values which lie in Rubens' paintings if they are unable to appreciate them. The present-day attitude is, notwithstanding a token respect for a venerable "old master," essentially negative. The reason for this is simple: The public, as well as the professional critics, are, as a rule, poor judges of paint techniques and what they mean in the sum total of a painter's esthetic merits.

To fully comprehend Rubens' greatness as a painter, so eloquently demonstrated in *Helene Fourment in Fur*, we must understand his working method, the manner of his technical procedure. For the uninitiated, a light on this procedure is cast by an account of Velazquez. Under the very eyes of the Spanish master, Rubens, then a special ambassador from England much engaged in delicate negotiations with the politicians, produced in his spare time the following paintings: "five life-size portraits of Philip the Fourth, of which one was equestrian; a portrait of the Queen; several portraits of Infantas; ten copies after originals by Titian; a life-size Saint John; and an Immaculate Conception thirty feet square." Such powers seem extraordinary, a sheer act of legerdemain. However, when one understands Rubens' technical procedure, it becomes quite credible that a life-size figure can be painted in a few days.

Rubens worked *alla prima*, that is to say without previous underpainting. He aimed from the start at the final effect. His manner of painting was, in essence, not different from that of Frans Hals. After the drawing had been transferred to the white support, a luminous imprimatura (i.e., a thin transparent stain of color), was lightly brushed onto the drawing. The final painting was done in one sitting, swiftly, leaving the imprimatura (which served to unify the tonality of his painting) uncovered in many spots. Once the painting had progressed to this stage, any further corrective paint layers—that is, overpaintings—were avoided. What does such a manner of procedure imply? It simply indicates spontaneity of rendition instead of complex cogitation. Rembrandt's art could only reach its height by complex cogitation. Rubens arrived by sheer verve and animated energy.

Only those paintings by Rubens which show a swift and spontaneous execution fully demonstrate his great mastery; only in these does he lose the heavy-handed, carnal touch and clumsiness of intellect which characterize his lesser works and all the works of Jordaens. An over-labored Rubens invariably appears beefy, inane. The best of Jordaens and a mediocre painting of Rubens meet on the same plane; but a great Rubens is in a class by itself.

As shown in *Helene Fourment in Fur* the swift grasp and illusion of pulsating life is complete. The impact of his manual reflexes and the very personal energetic dexterity of his hand are expressed in every inch of the canvas. Like the best work of Renoir's middle period, the delight in his own prowess, the *joie de vivre*, is immediately transferred to the beholder. (Peculiarly—but not surprisingly—most of our art-conscious élite suffer from a delusion that it is the late rather than the early work of Renoir which breathes greatness. When we recall that in his old age, because of a crippling affliction, Renoir could not hold the brush [it had to be strapped to his hand], the absurdity of such misapprehension at once becomes apparent.)

Art such as Renoir's or Rubens' finds its consummate expression in



THE KING DRINKS · JACOPO JORDAENS

the display of a marvelous skill in rendering the oscillating surface of life, and not in groping for psychological inferences and metaphorical innuendoes. It is not in the search for depth and the struggle to form, forge, and release the inner vision that these painters excel. *Helene Fourment in Fur* is not a question, it is the highest affirmation of life, its gifts and its blessings.

JACOPO JORDAENS

THE KING DRINKS

I have said that originality of approach presupposes imagination, but an imaginative conception need not be original. The quality of imagination has many facets; it can be lyric, dramatic, weird, morbid, or humorous. Also, the degree of intensity varies. An imagination which produces art is poetic in nature. As contrasted with the poetic, sobriety and the prosaic defy all artistic endeavors, and a fortuitous poetry—sentimentality—ruins it utterly.

Poetic imagination, the faculty of sublimating the coarse and commonplace, is utterly lacking in the work of Jordaens. He attacks the sensual with a heavy hand and, as though he were afraid of not doing enough to his picture, overplays his hand. Not knowing when to stop, he runs amok. Under his brush, animation turns luxuriant, rapacious; appetite grows to debauch. But *The King Drinks* is not a mean painting. The artist has learned his lessons; he knows his technique, he knows his colors, and he has the audacity to display them both. Yet his efforts are scantily rewarded.

FRANCESCO GUARDI

(1712-1793)

CAMPO SAN ZANIPOLO

(National Gallery, Washington, D.C.)

FANTASTIC LANDSCAPE

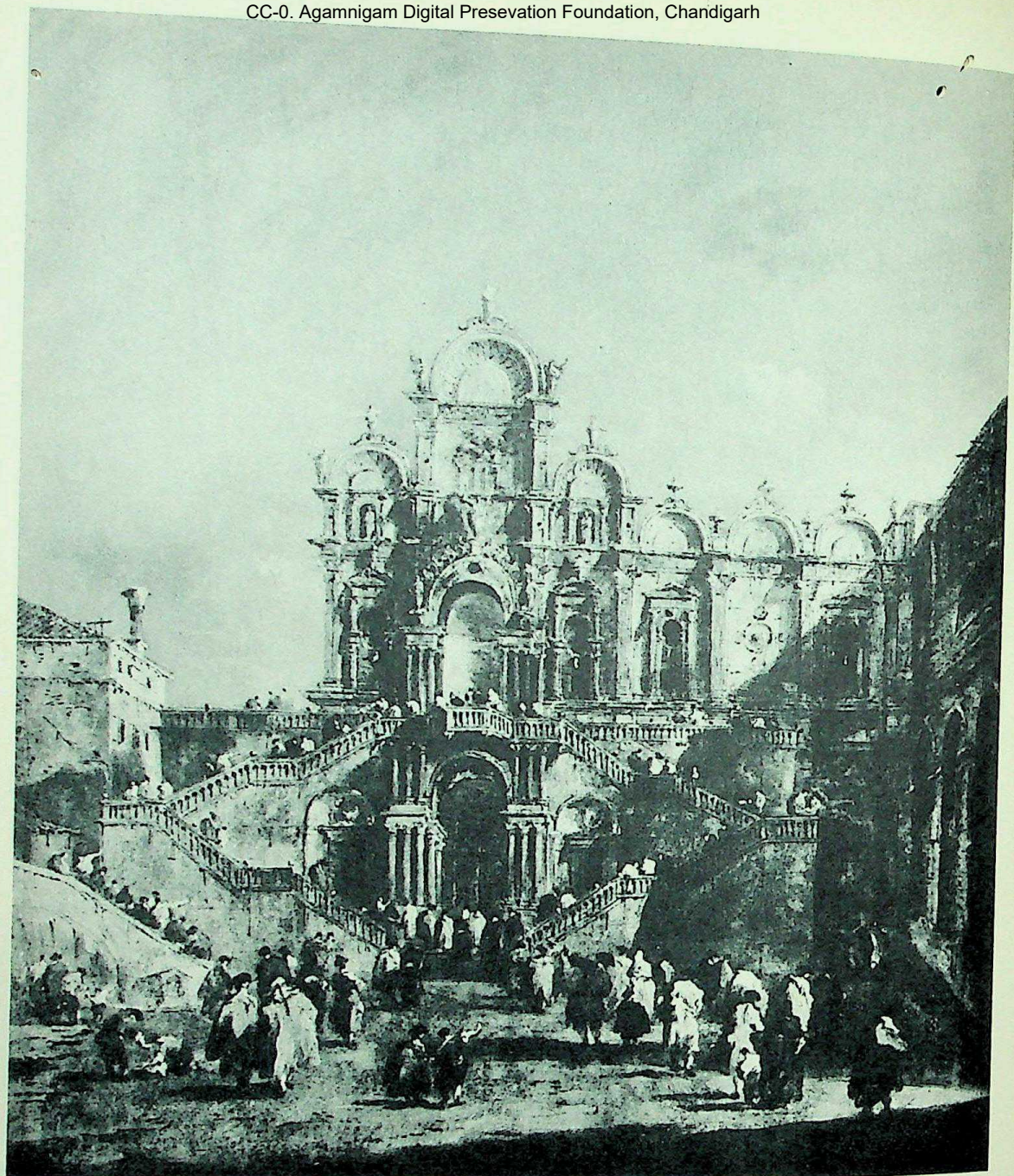
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

CANALETTO (ANTONIO CANALE)

(1696-1768)

VIEW OF SALUTE, VENICE

(Metropolitan Museum of Art)



CAMPO SAN ZANIPOLLO · FRANCESCO GUARDI

FRANCESCO GUARDI

CAMPO SAN ZANIPOLO FANTASTIC LANDSCAPE

DURING his lifetime he was held of little account. He was probably the only one of the late Baroque painters who suffered from neglect. This, in the light of later appraisal, indicates that his art was above the comprehension of his contemporaries. The leading art patron of Venice at that time (one Joseph Smith, British Consul), hardly knew of his existence, or at least thought his work of no importance; there was no Guardi listed in his collection. Casanova in his *Memoirs* mentions that his brother lived in the house of a painter "named Guardi"—that is all. Half a century after his death, the art experts referred to Guardi as a "good pupil of Canaletto." And so it has often gone with a painter who has had something to say which was his very own—when his ideas have not happened to be en rapport with his time. When he has not caught the errant fancy of the snobbish art initiates, he has, in many instances, been neglected.

The once forgotten Guardi is today the greatest source of inspiration to the neo-Romantic school of painters, the spiritual forerunner of the modern Surrealists.

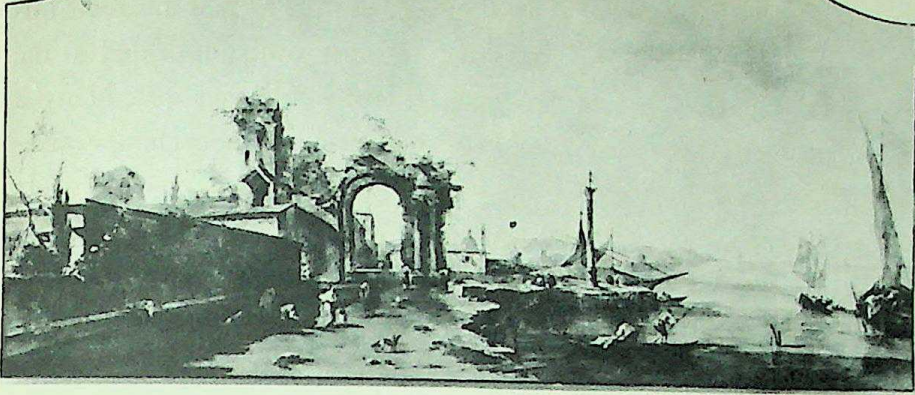
Concerning the power of influencing one's own generation or posterity, it is appropriate to investigate whether such power invariably demonstrates a painter's significance. History proves that an artist's capacity to attract disciples and imitators during his lifetime does not

necessarily indicate greatness. It simply shows that he had the good fortune or the ingenuity to hit upon some manner which appealed to the public, and other painters, craving like favor, followed suit. Many a minor painter has exerted a powerful influence on his contemporaries while the work of some of the foremost masters remained entirely isolated during their lifetime.

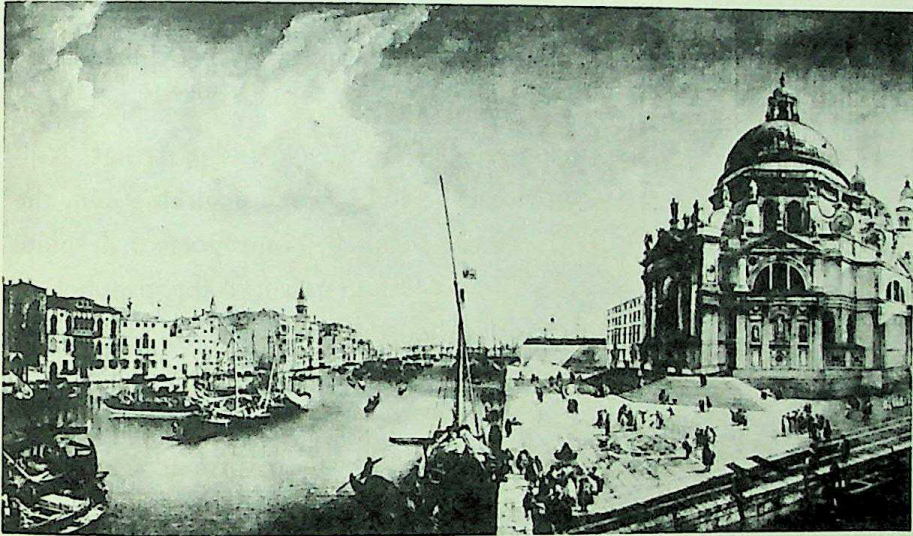
El Greco, one of the greatest precursors of Expressionism, is perhaps the best example of a painter who did not create a school. An opposite case is that of the contemporary painter, Pablo Picasso, whose phenomenal following and popularity are often erroneously interpreted as a measure of his greatness. I do not doubt that time will bear me out in this assertion. Time also proves that whenever the work of a painter comes to light and exerts an influence after a long period of oblivion, his work must possess innate power and validity.

A strange persuasive power emanates from Guardi's paintings, issuing from the melancholy distances, the light of the declining sun, the long shadows cast upon the lonely lagoons. He is the poet of desolate beaches, vast melancholy skies, mouldering palaces; the prophet of ruin, the mournful spirit of decline; the improviser of moods of nostalgia, of the mystery of darkness creeping into the recesses of decaying marbles, crumbling stones, arches, and porticoes, of fleeting light departing from the marshy waters of canals. In his paintings a lost past dreams and an enigmatic, uncertain present; the air is that of autumn, with burnished glints of the sun low on the horizon. Above the city vistas, the beaches, the sea, and the aimless, forlorn figures, hovers a haze of the irrational, a presentiment of the inescapable destiny of man and his works.

How is this mood induced by a painting? By the display of agitated brush-strokes, nervous light and shade effects; the melancholy softness of the filtered sunrays as they touch the moist marbles, limp sails, and worn pavements of the piazzas before departing, as it were, forever, from the splendor they illuminate.



FANTASTIC LANDSCAPE • FRANCESCO GUARDI



CANALETTO (ANTONIO CANALE)

VIEW OF SALUTE, VENICE

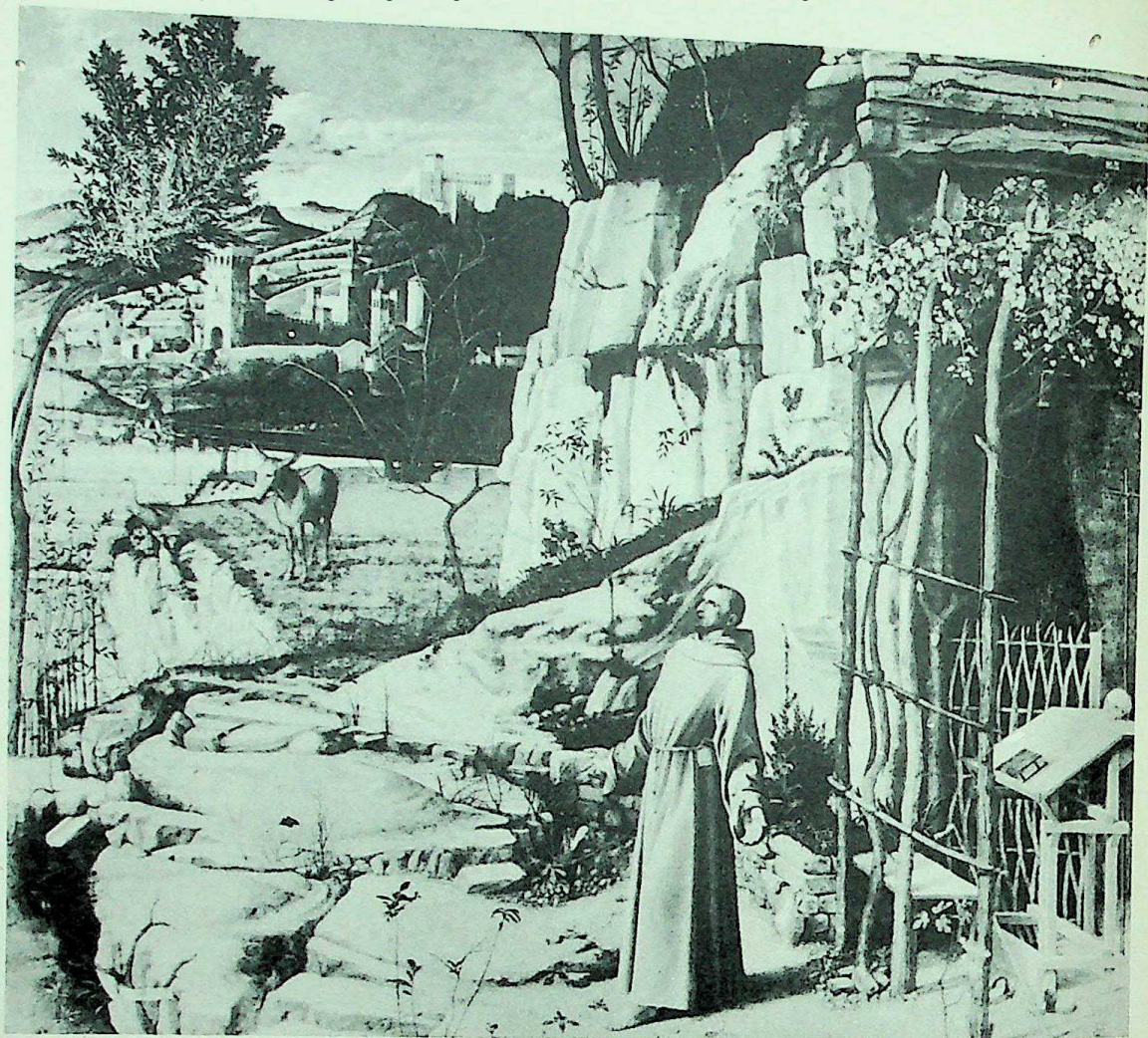
A wonderful painter, a great virtuoso in his métier, Canaletto could be compared in many ways with Guardi. But he lacks the latter's imagination, originality, and sense of the extraordinary. The factual, the authentic, are his domain; he is a brilliant recorder of reality.

GIOVANNI BELLINI

(1428?–1516)

SAINT FRANCIS

(*Frick Collection, New York*)



SAINT FRANCIS • GIOVANNI BELLINI

GIOVANNI BELLINI

SAINT FRANCIS

SINCE the advent of the industrial age many a great painter has passed unnoticed, but during the Renaissance, no man of great ability lacked recognition. Bellini's genius was extolled by all. Albrecht Dürer and Ariosto praised him as among the greatest of painters; and our estimate of Bellini today is in full agreement with theirs, even though our own inclinations of taste in painting are far removed from his world.

These words of Vasari illustrate the esthetic ideas of his time: "One of Bellini's paintings," he writes of the portrait of Pietro Bembo's mistress, "was done with such truth and animation that it was celebrated by sonnets. . . . The texture of skin, of glossy damask, of fur, and silk, are copied to life." On another occasion "the colors were painted with such softness and the shadows were treated so admirably that they seemed to be of living flesh." "Living flesh," "copied to life," "grace, beauty, sweetness," "nobility of character"—these words, which often recur in Vasari's writings, point to esthetic concepts utterly remote from our own. Yet it is not really the concepts but the connotations that have changed; the criteria of beauty remain the same. The principles governing values in art are immutable; the defining words, however, wear out rapidly, lose their esoteric color, and a new idiom is evolved. Doubtless our contemporary stock phrases—dynamic, plastic, architecture of space, vital design, and the like—will sound strange in a few decades or so. Vasari's statement "copied to life" really does not mean that

Bellini followed his ocular sensations obsequiously. A scrutiny of *Saint Francis* will at once convince the beholder that every motif in the picture has in it an element of invention and stylization. The setting of *Saint Francis* is not nature as it appears to the eye, but nature seen through the intellect of Giovanni Bellini. Vasari's esthetic matrix applies in equal measure to Giorgione, Mantegna, Carpaccio, and others. Every one of these painters "copied" or "imitated" nature after his own fashion, and each of them added to our fund of experience some new aspect of nature.

The schism between our concept of esthetic values and that of the Renaissance men lies chiefly in the fact that, whereas the moderns vie in being different and novel, the Renaissance painters emulated one another in their strivings toward perfection. This is not to say that originality weighed little with the early masters. On the contrary, true originality was given great praise, but there was no hysterical competition among them to cast off all tradition and start the discipline of painting from scratch.

Now let us examine a tradition, one which still persists even with the nonobjective painters of our day, and which is so eloquently manifest in the work of Bellini—that of texture. Incidentally, one of the very few redeeming features which some of the nonobjective paintings can boast is the inclusion of variable undulating textures. But, whereas texture as used by abstract painters serves its own purpose—texture for texture's sake—Vasari refers to specific textures such as that "of skin, of glossy damask, of fur." Bellini belongs to the school of painters who treat all materials according to their specific tactile values; so his rocks in our painting convey the feeling of a hard, sandy surface, the sky is vaporous, the foliage soft and silky—each matter is treated according to its nature.

Besides the textural refinements which enchant our eye in Bellini's painting, its illumination, too, affords us extraordinarily pleasurable sensations. The scene is flooded with a gentle light. It strikes some of

the soft-edged rocks worn by time and washed smooth by rain. The light illuminates some parts of the scene and, where a cloud in mid-air absorbs the rays of the sun, it submerges other areas in shadow. Here the soft rays of the declining sun play on the towers, the walls, and the meadows; there a shadow enwraps in a dark veil the moist river abutment, the bridge, the shepherd and his flock, a clump of bushes, or a distant hill. Much as the light changes from precise focus to dim softness, the unity of the allover effect is never disrupted by a false accent or a fortuitous intent. The confluence of these dark and light masses, the manner in which they are played one against the other, give a lyric mood and dream-like atmosphere to the painting and create a feeling of heightened enchantment. With rare understanding for noble pictorial organization, the simple solid masses are placed on stagelike platforms between receding backdrops, and all parts are coordinated by means of stern diagonals, horizontals, and verticals. Thus the whole panoramic scene shows great strength, unity, and order.

But Bellini understood not only how to preserve a monumental concept; he also gave his attention to minute details. Although these details are carefully studied and lovingly depicted, they are never petty, garrulous, pedantic; they are monumental in themselves. It is quite difficult to paint every leaf on a tree, so to speak, and not lose sight of the whole. To realize how the details in Bellini's painting function, it is revealing to compare it with some panels by Fragonard and Boucher in the adjoining rooms at the Frick Collection. In these panels the details serve no purpose other than superficial space filling and so remain perfunctory and meaningless.

As to the technique of the painting—no one today, I presume, would attempt to paint like Bellini. And it must be added, that with present-day commercial paints this would hardly be possible. Strange as it may seem, it is often the nature of the paint, its physical quality, on which some of the spirit of a painting depends. Observe the handling of the weeds, grasses, foliage, twigs, and branches—they have a soft-edged

configuration, are plastically raised in a manner that could not be produced with the common tube paint. Why some of the pastose applications should manage to convey the feeling of energy, investment of nerve and marrow, such as cannot be found in a flat handling of paint, is, indeed, hard to explain. The fact remains that these plants, grasses, and trees have a life all their own.

In contrast to the pastose treatment of these motifs, the rocks are glazed. Here the flat paint suggests the texture of the sandstone, variegated by the cold grey and warm ocherish passages. Above all, there is such wealth of invention, such delight of the painter in every facet of nature that, infected with his exuberance, the eye of the beholder never tires of discovering some new charming detail, modulation of color, or ingenious twist of design.

GIORGIONE

(1478?–1510)

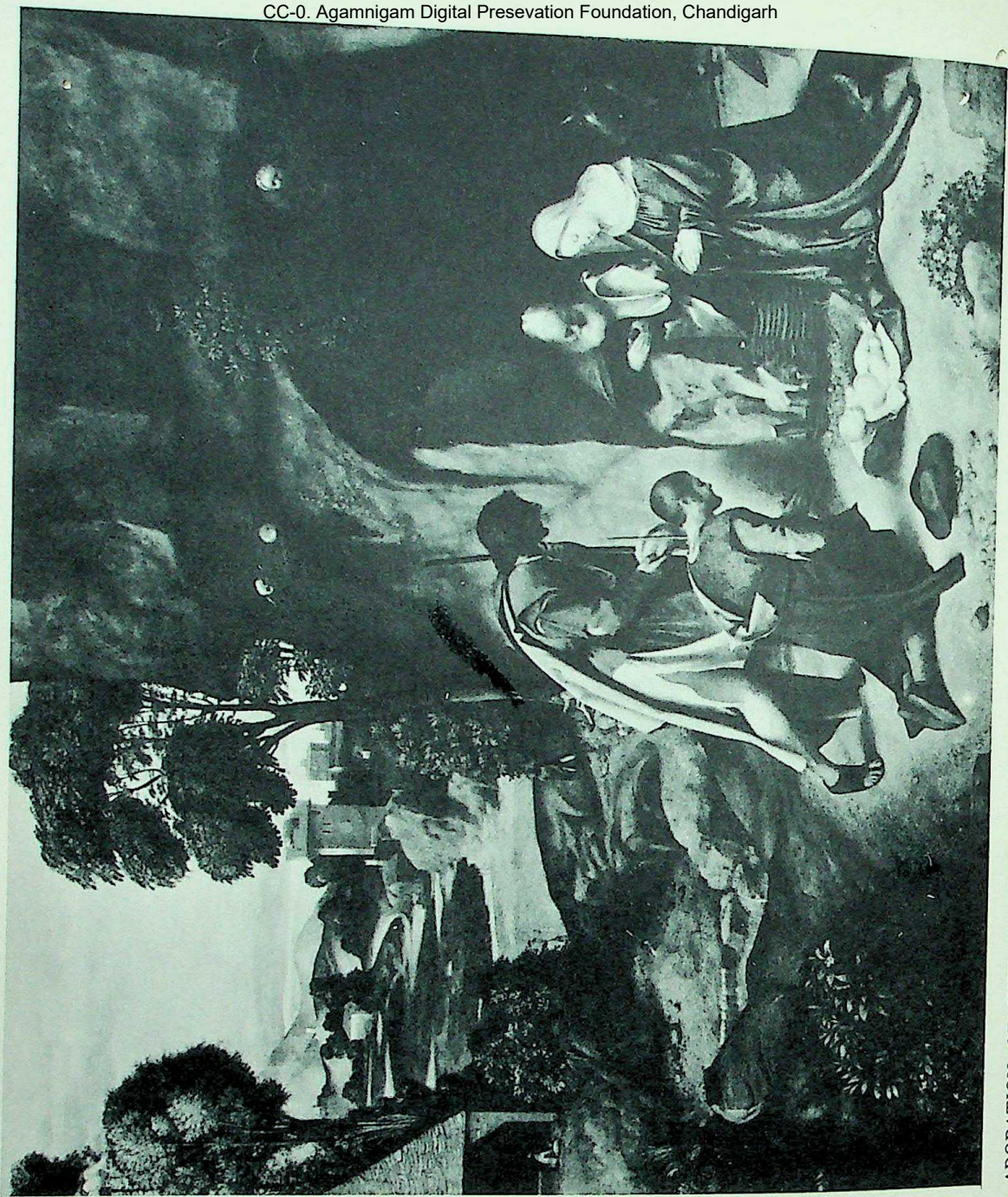
ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS
(*National Gallery, Washington, D.C.*)

PASTORAL SYMPHONY
(*The Louvre, Paris*)

FRANCESCO ALBANI

(1578–1660)

CUPIDS DANCING
(*Picture Gallery, Dresden*)



ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS · GIORGIONE

GIORGIONE

ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

PASTORAL SYMPHONY

“GIORGIONE selected for his pictures the most beautiful objects that he could find. He was born to bring a new spirit to painting and to copy the freshness of the living form more exactly than any other painter in Venice or anywhere else . . . his colors are blended with such perfect harmony that his objects seem to be a relief rather than a painting.”
Vasari.

Attributes like these can be ascribed to many other painters, but in Giorgione's work there are some virtues of the rarest kind. Perhaps the first impression produced by his paintings is a sense of the inevitability of every pictorial exposition he sets forth. All parts of the composition—details and central motifs—are welded together into a oneness with a finality that makes us believe—“it cannot be otherwise—this is ultimate perfection.” In Giorgione, we feel it is geometric necessity rather than the fancy of the painter that rules and co-ordinates the elements of his composition. Nothing here could be re-arranged, added, or erased; no variations or modifications of any kind could improve the logic of the pictorial construction.

As has been demonstrated in previous analyses, there are many elements characteristic of a masterpiece. If I were to name just one general quality that stands out foremost in Giorgione's paintings, I should say: It is the inexorable logic of their construction. This element in a



PASTORAL SYMPHONY · GIORGIONE

painting is perhaps the most neglected today—in spite of Cézanne who, only yesterday, taught the painters anew how to achieve solidity in composition. When mentioning “solidity,” the problem of the conditioning of forms comes to mind, since the use of distortion for the attainment of such solidity is frequently justified. Conditionings of form have been practised in all ages, although in classic art they were used within certain narrow limits. When we contemplate the nudes in the *Pastoral Symphony*, the pronouncedly swollen torsos do not conform to the ideal set by the marble nymphs of Greece, yet the beauty of these figures is above all consideration. Their beauty lies in the intrinsic logic with which they fit into the surroundings, they are part of nature and one with its elements. The figures have not the sensuousness of Titian nor the voluptuousness of Rubens, but in those massive forms lies, as it were, the spiritual secret of nakedness. Could anyone imagine these nudes silhouetted like the gallant ladies of the Rococo, or the smart models of the twentieth-century couturier’s shops? What a grotesque,—a blasphemous thought!

Besides the perfect composition which entrances us in the paintings of Giorgione, there is a strange power to stimulate the imagination and awaken associational feelings. Here, the analyst must admit, a disquieting element enters into our calculus and, alas, the nature of this element seems to be unfathomable. I am well aware that my method of analysis is neither original nor new. It was De Piles, I believe, who, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, suggested that when examining paintings, marks should be given for composition, execution, draftsmanship, the use of light and shade. When on one such occasion these marks were added up, a saccharine concoction by Francesco Albani—*Cupids Dancing*—emerged at the top of the list, above Michelangelo and Raphael. Now perhaps De Piles had not considered that a trivial conception would mercilessly and unfailingly annihilate the allure of a most effective chiaroscuro and render the most perfect execution meaningless; perhaps he had not understood that execution can not be “perfect” and common-

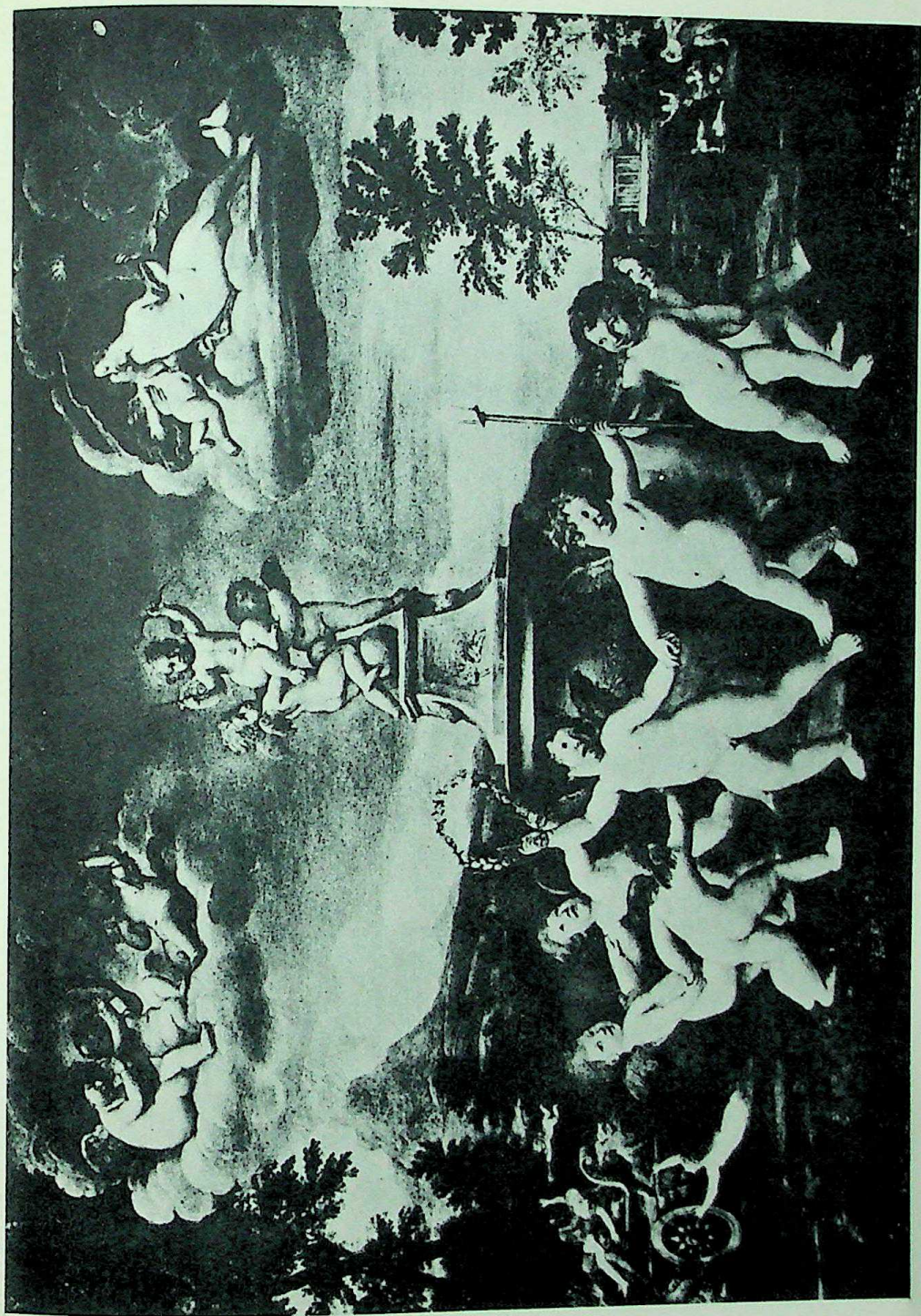
place at the same time. These conceptions exclude each other. Besides, it is hard to understand how one could ever speak of good composition in the *Cupids Dancing*. How could one ever consider draftsmanship or chiaroscuro in such a trivial decoration? For it must at once be apparent that this picture expresses merely boredom, mediocrity, and banality.

But—returning to the *Pastoral Symphony*—our established standards, although just and true, cannot quite uncover all the secrets that may dwell in a painting such as this. Alas, in spite of all our acuteness of reasoning, there may still remain dormant in it a measure of the incalculable, else how could one account for the feeling of intensity, strangeness, and high tension, which underlies Giorgione's paintings? How can we explain the sense of presentiment awakened by so simple a composition as the *Pastoral Symphony*? It is not a great feat as a rule, to exalt one's subject matter by the use of obvious symbolism, but to invest a painting with symbolic meaning unintentionally is the highest point in art. Giorgione's paintings are charged with symbolic inferences; they are, as a poet has put it, like dreams of an existence in another world; scarcely understood, they reflect some ancient prophecies, echo a music from a distant planet. They make one feel as if some faded, incoherent memories of a remote age had suddenly become awake in us and were crying for deliverance.

FRANCESCO ALBANI

CUPIDS DANCING

It is hard to understand how mediocre paintings such as those produced by Albani ever became objects of museum collections unless we have reason to suppose that trade interests stood behind them. It is impossible to comprehend how some arbiters of art such as De Piles could compare Albani's work—favorably!—with a Raphael or a Michelangelo.



CUPIDS DANCING • FRANCESCO ALBANI

However, if we remember that some of our present-day pretenders to connoisseurship compare a Matisse with the great masters of the past, we can only conclude that human folly and confusion in matters of esthetics are immutable and know no limits. (" . . . in the reds, for instance, Matisse merges the fiery fullness of Rubens with the mellowness of Titian . . ." writes Albert Barnes.)

Albani's cupids belong with the most vapid creations in Baroque paintings. Insipidly composed, ugly in paint quality, trivial in lighting, the *Cupids Dancing* is what we have come to call a calendar picture.

Superficiality, sentimentality, cuteness, are the qualities which attract the eye of the artistically illiterate; certainly the mind of the sentimentalist will be charmed by this flock of bedimpled amoretti frolicking in ambrosial everglades. But the sober investigator will ask himself: What are the reasons for the complete failure of the picture? Is it the scraggy paint surface, the saccharine color, or the incapacity of the painter to subordinate details to the collective concept and unite the elements of the composition into a harmonious whole?

VITTORE CARPACCIO

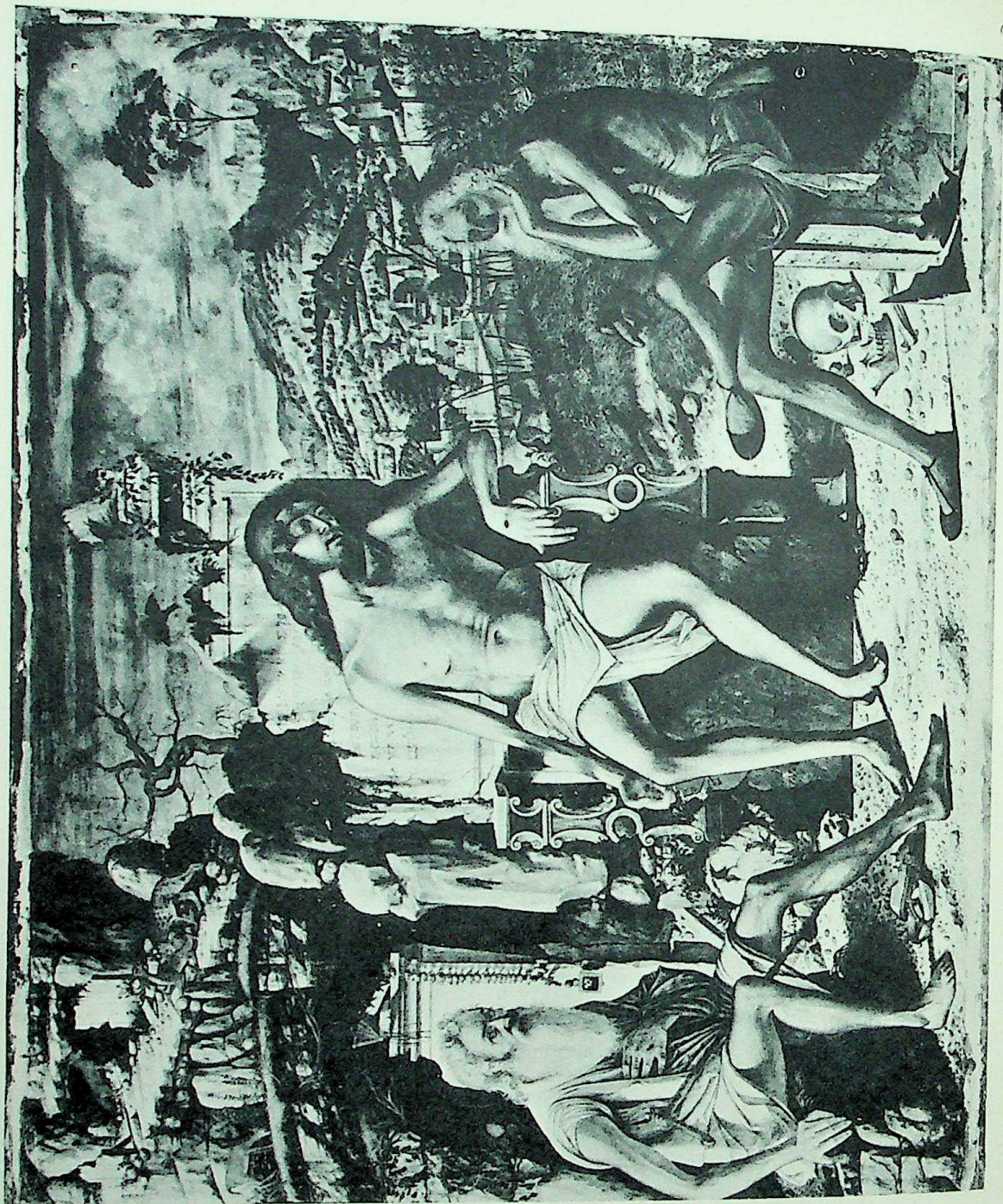
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MEDITATION ON THE PASSION

(*Metropolitan Museum, New York*)

BURIAL OF CHRIST

(*Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin*)



MEDITATION ON THE PASSION · VITTORE CARPACCIO

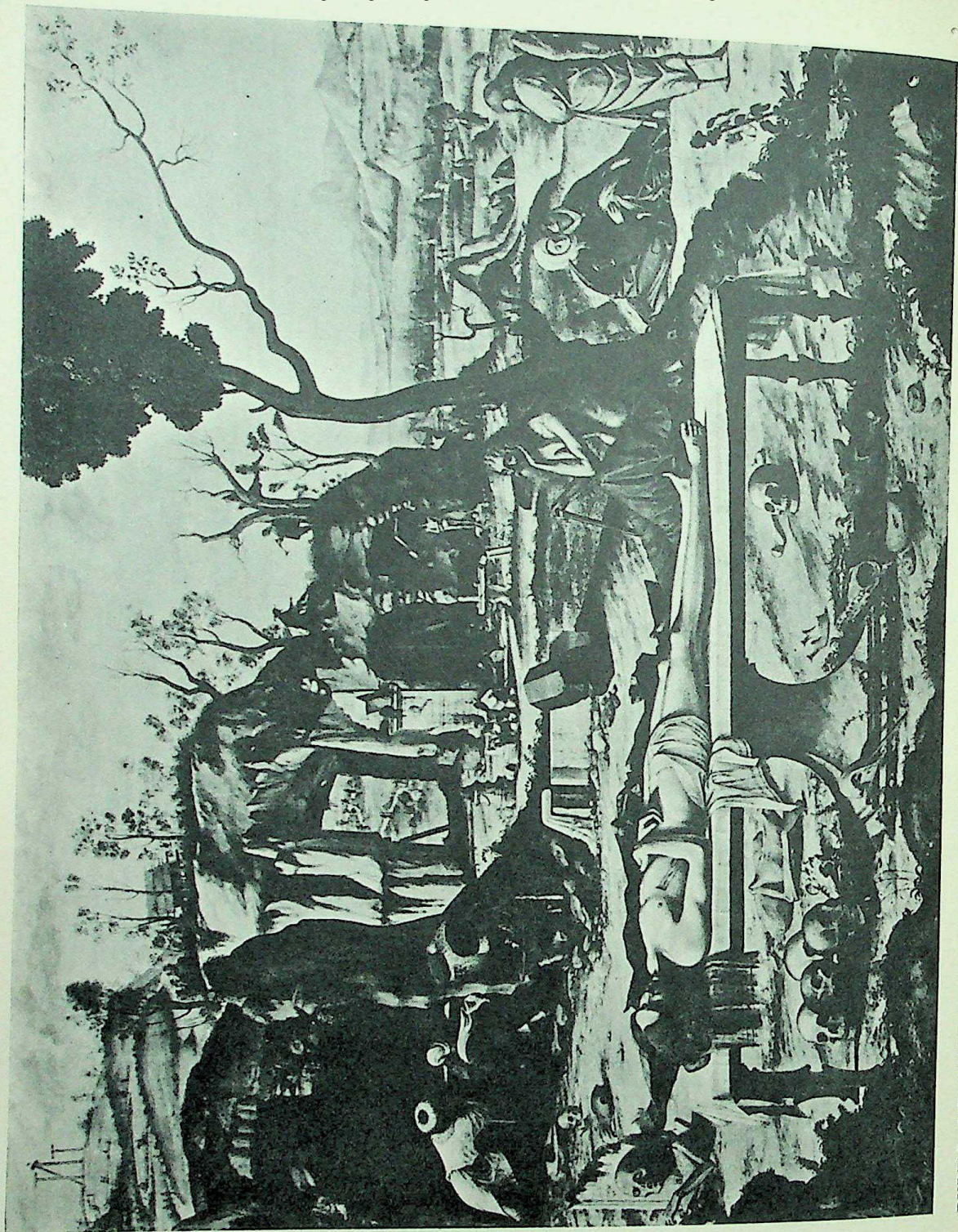
VITTORE CARPACCIO

MEDITATION ON THE PASSION BURIAL OF CHRIST

ART criticism which is not based on principles often gives rise to strange contradictions and vagaries. Of Rembrandt, John Ruskin said: "A very bad painter . . . his colors vulgar, impious, dull." And of Carpaccio's *Two Courtesans*: "I know of no other painting which invokes every namable quality of the painter's art in so intense a degree—breadth with minuteness, brilliancy with quietness, decision with tenderness, color with light and shade." It is difficult to understand how a critic can fail so completely in his judgment in one instance and show enlightened insight in another. But such failures are frequent enough to demonstrate clearly how untrustworthy can be the opinion of a critic when he allows himself to be guided by his personal idiosyncrasies or the conventions which happen to underlie the taste of his time.

Of course, it is natural and inevitable that we should prefer one style to another and that our preferences should change as we develop. "The things which pleased me so much fifteen years ago now please me no more," wrote Albrecht Dürer when he revisited Venice. This does not necessarily imply that Dürer had lost his appreciation for a painter like Carpaccio, who was still working in the archaic style, but that this particular direction in art could not satisfy his new esthetic demands.

Once the archaic style of Carpaccio had been held in great esteem, but with the advent of the sensualism of Giorgione and Titian, Carpaccio



BURIAL OF CHRIST · VITTORE CARPACCIO

and his circle were looked upon by sixteenth-century modernists as "awkward painters who produced cold and lifeless work."

Vasari, however, seems not to have shared this opinion of his advanced contemporaries. "There were many painters," he wrote, "who belonged to the school of Bellini, but Carpaccio was the most important."

The esthetic preferences of our time show considerable sympathy for ideas expressed in some of Carpaccio's paintings. These ideas were once looked upon as reflecting "truth and beauty." Later, as already quoted, they were dubbed "awkward and lifeless." Today they suggest a heightened form of reality for which the term "Surrealism" was coined. Surrealism gives us the parable of reality; it consciously uses old and new symbols to allude to secret meanings hidden behind the mask of the actual. The Surrealists rarely seek for a new form wherein to clothe their images. Carpaccio, too, seems to have been contemptuous of innovations; he adhered closely to archaic fashion and it is this fashion which conjures up in our minds some ancient myths of strange and significant portent.

What I have been observing pertains to the iconography of a picture or its subject matter and not to a specific pictorial rendering. Since the arrival of the Impressionists preoccupation with subject matter has been looked upon askance. "An apple or a haystack," they used to say, "has as much meaning as the countenance of the Madonna. True meaning rests only with the light and its effect on the object—any object." Now we can argue forever about ideologies in art without finding all the answers, but let me assure the reader that it is quite easy to paint a light effect playing on the surface of a haystack or an apple; but it is quite another matter to paint the face of a saint, or of any humble person, and give it depth and significance.

"The painters' work should move the emotions and passions of the soul so that those who behold it are either delighted or perturbed according to the subject, as in the work of poets and orators," wrote Ludovico

Dolce to Gasparo Bellini. The maxim is still good; to be a work of art a painting must be capable of delighting or in some way moving us, and the scenes of the *Meditation* and the *Burial* are both profoundly moving and perturbing. It is not the drama in these pictures that grips us, but the surrealistic mood of the scene—human tragedy in the face of the aloof unconcern of nature. Detached, forlorn, is the creature in the cold light of Eternity, frozen in motion is man; his work decays under the growth of mushrooming stones, moss, and weeds; inevitably, Chronos consumes his creation. Relics of past splendor intensify the feeling of desolation; a crumbling throne, a noble bier, are set in a strange landscape; all objects seem to be torn from their accustomed environs, and to be leading an enigmatic life amid incongruous company. With almost maniacal insistence, the painter holds all his objects in sharp focus; every part of the painting carries the same urgent charge. Here we find the chipped-off corner and its corresponding cavity in the stone block, there a panther stalking his prey, a Gethsemane dotted with crosses, or the outstretched branch of a tree pointing into the picture's corner like an invoking arm. Such is the necromantic saga in which is mirrored this painter's fecund imagination.

ANDREA MANTEGNA
(1 4 3 1 - 1 5 0 6)

ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS
(*National Gallery, Washington, D.C.*)

MADONNA OF THE QUARRIES
(*Uffizi, Florence*)



ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS • ANDREA MANTECNA

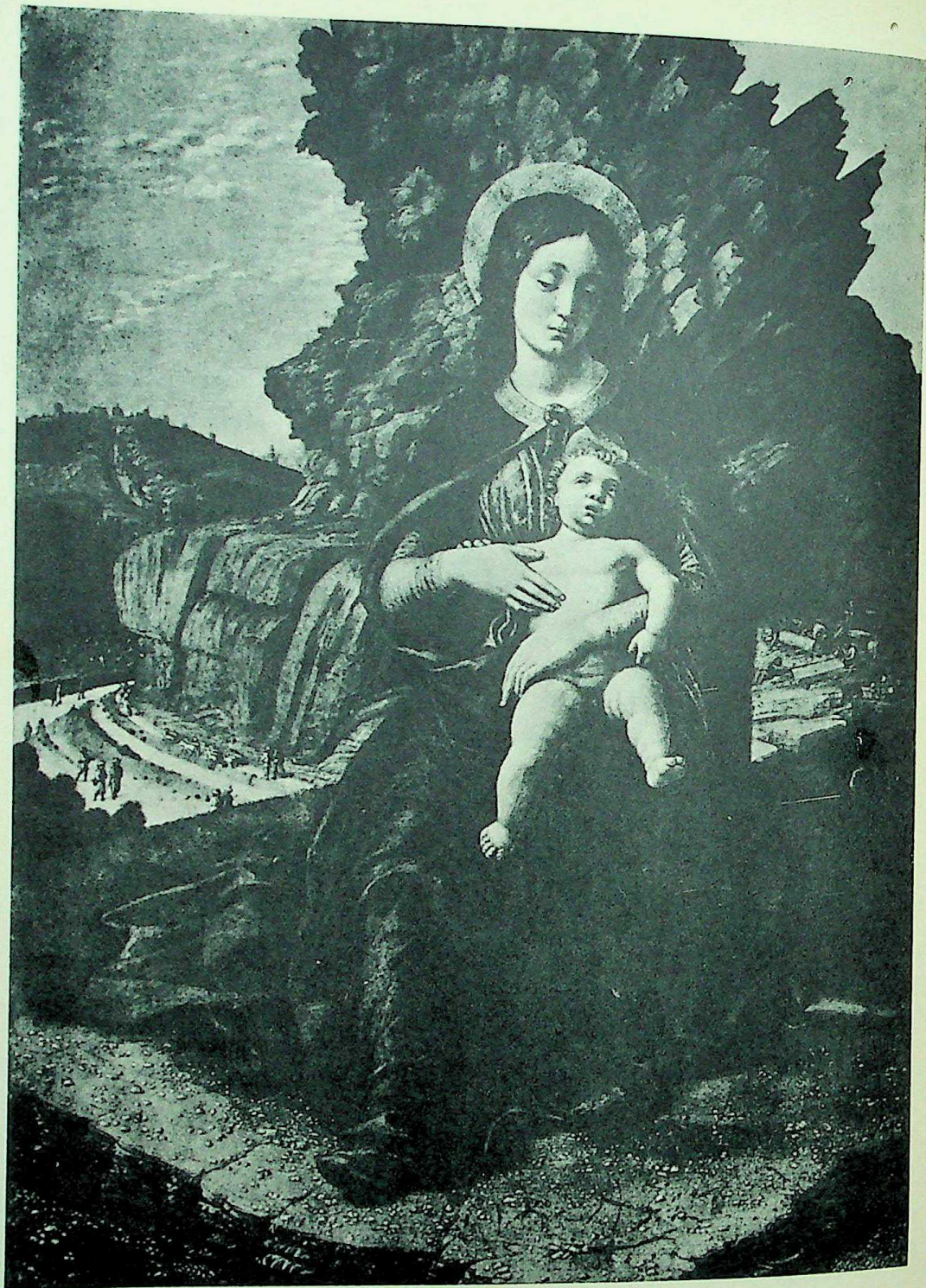
MANTEGNA

ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

THE MADONNA OF THE QUARRIES

IN THE art of Mantegna, all forms are precise, definite, concrete. His hand, with archaic severity, subjects all motifs to exact, solid volumes. His style is the very antithesis of the impressionistic, where form is left dissolved, exposed to the fortuitous chance and circumstance of light and atmosphere, and the passing cloud can change the shape of a mountain.

Mantegna held that the antique was more perfect than nature and that the Hellenistic statues were more beautiful than flesh and blood. His figures derive their form more from Roman statuary than from life, and his landscapes partake more of geology than geography. He leaves nothing to chance; the plan of the painting is thought out carefully, systematically. Research replaces sentiment, science, the sway of emotions. The quality of line and color makes it appear so. It is, according to ordinary experience, color—muted or sensuous and line—nervous, ecstatic—which arouse certain sentiments and emotions. But Mantegna's color is unemotional, it does not express feeling, in fact it is subordinate; his line is conceived as ornament. What is it, then, that captivates our attention and commands our admiration? It is not his science, archaeological knowledge, enormous skill and industry, but the dynamic force which underlies his constructions, the rhythm that sweeps through them and pervades the entire composition, in other



MADONNA OF THE QUARRIES • ANDREA MANTEGNA

words, the spatial organization of his paintings.

"Spatial organization," we call it, somewhat pompously, but we might as well say simply, perspective, as it is perspective that determines the organization of objects in space. The type of perspective used by the Renaissance painters (which, incidentally, is totally alien to the modern conception) is known as scientific perspective. It was the Flemish masters who, in advance of the Italians, evolved scientific perspective by sheer observation, and the Italians developed the system along mathematical lines. Uccello, according to Vasari, established the rules of linear perspective. "He found means," says Vasari, "to make his figures really seem to be standing on the floor plane and showed how they must diminish in the distance. He also discovered a way of turning the arches and vaultings of ceilings; of shortening the floors by converging the beams . . . this was formerly done by chance, as best the artist could." Mantegna was even a greater master of the art of perspective than Uccello and no less an inventor of the system which, together with the science of anatomy, became the guiding spirit of Renaissance art.

According to Roger Fry, "Neither perspective nor anatomy has any immediate bearing upon art—both of them are means of ascertaining facts, and the question of art begins where the question of facts ends." In other words, facts as such do not enter the realm of art; as soon as certain phenomena become "facts" their value in art is lost. But to become a fact, a phenomenon must first be visualized and explored. Pollaiuolo dissected corpses long before the medicos conceived the idea. Discovery and exploration of plastic anatomy and scientific perspective in painting was, with the Renaissance men, a creative pursuit; it satisfied also their craving for exactness and verisimilitude. When Leonardo defended painting he asserted that it was more of a science than sculpture, music or poetry. But what was once a creative thought later became a devitalized, imitative scheme. Michelangelo already sensed that no new

avenues for discovery in plastic anatomy were left, for he said: "My science will destroy everyone who comes after me."

To return to the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, where the sorcery of perspective was still able to turn new corners—behold the rhythm of the serpentine landscape, as it winds into the mystical distance. Follow the stratified earth, here twisting in curves and winding ellipses, there breaking into sharp angles. The figures, too, are involved in the almighty rhythm, for only a few forms remain still: the Madonna, the lone tree in the background, and the becalmed sky. How different would have been the approach of a Baroque painter, who would have subjected all the motifs to identical, unifying motion. But it is calm which makes action appear more poignant; and here in the *Adoration* it is the parallel horizontal lines of clouds, the vertical figures of the Madonna and the tree, which reveal, and by contrast emphasize, the dynamic power of the spirals.

In our day, especially, there is much talk about "abstract design." If we think of a formal, abstract arrangement—an arrangement of non-representational volumes—when we de-individualize the *Madonna of the Quarries*, the abstract construction underlying the composition emerges in all its sheer, heroic grandeur.

Wherein rests abstract quality in a painting? In volumes—cones, cubes, cylinders, and the like. They can be static, or they can be dynamic, have rhythm, movement, drift. How does the abstract dynamic force objectivate itself in the *Madonna of the Quarries*? Starting from the outstretched leg of the sitting figure, the motion drives into the picture's plane, climbs into the middle ground, whence, in a keen, cascade-like plunge, it sinks into the bowels of the earth—the precipitous quarries. Another force gathers at the base of the rock and swings into the distance, cutting the flight through hills in steep serpentines. Still more dynamic power rises upwards as if released by a titanic force, then bursts obliquely across the top of the picture in prongs and crystalline facets, as shooting stars erupt into billowing skies.

PISANELLO

(1 3 9 5 ? - 1 4 5 5 ?)

PROFILE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

(*National Gallery, Washington, D. C.*)

THOMAS LAWRENCE

(1 7 6 9 - 1 8 3 0)

LADY PEEL

(*Frick Collection, New York*)



LADY PEEL · THOMAS LAWRENCE



PROFILE PORTRAIT OF A LADY • PISANELLO

PISANELLO

PROFILE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

THE TWO works shown together on opposite pages are obviously utterly incongruous in concept and rendition. Both are portraits of ladies of distinction and both are, no doubt, faithful likenesses. However, the cardinal difference between them lies in the fact that, whereas Pisanello treats his subject as ornament, Lawrence tried to recapture life, consequently it would seem that the ornamental and the lifelike are at odds.

When studying the history of ornament we find that, although it had a series of ups and downs, a final degeneration of the decorative set in with the advent of the industrial age. At the time of Pisanello, the decorative was still an integral part of everyday life—ornament was the essence of its style.

In the shaping of art, the problem of style plays a much bigger part than is generally recognized. Craftsmanship, guided by good style, can produce good art. Minor painters—unknown, anonymous craftsmen of past ages in which a good style prevailed—produced notable works that have survived. The same cannot be claimed for minor artists of, let us say, the Victorian Age, or the time of the Rococo.

Good style is rare; it can evolve only out of continuity of tradition. Styles develop slowly, improved by trial and error; the best form elements, the most pleasing proportions, are retained, cultivated, fostered. But they deteriorate, too. Even the best of styles, when subjected to elaboration, may degenerate, as did the noble forms of the early Renais-

sance, which turned later, in the 16th century, to pompous, florid monstrosities. With growing wealth and power, the patron demanded "bigger and better" effects, thus simple good forms have often become the victims of a patron's delusion of grandeur.

Wherein then, lies the secret of a good style? In simplicity. Or, more accurately, simple forms have the best chance of creating a good style. Simple forms, however, are not necessarily good forms. In our age, bent on simplification, we see many forms that are at once simple and thoroughly ugly. On the other hand, there are complex styles which are supremely beautiful—see the ornaments of the late Baroque.

Our own time lacks style traditions; it is inimical to the ornate. Modern forms which are meant to be "functional" negate the very essence of the decorative. Functionalism is the *raison d'être* of the machine, and the machine has become the central nerve of our existence.

Because our own style or lack of style has no traditional ties, it is subject to erratic changes. The machine, as yet, has not succeeded in producing unified style; streamlining is hardly applicable to art. And, since escape into the style of the Renaissance or the Rococo would be a bad lapse into an anachronism just overcome by our fathers, modern man has delved into utterly remote cultures whence he gathers his art forms, to wit: Coptic, Byzantine, Negroid, Mayan, Polynesian. There is also, of course, the retreat into abstract art which is, clearly, the true style of the machines. It is needless to point out that the machine is not germane nor germinal to art.

I do not believe that we can fix the precise moment when ornament lost its good standing. But it seems that at the time when Lawrence painted his portrait, indications of a new age were already in the air. Perhaps it is this premonition which gives a somewhat ludicrous tinge to the representation of the fair lady. Neither the ornament nor the humanity in the painting is quite genuine. Romney was no Rembrandt; to reach for the depth in the human element was beyond his power.

And now, turning to the *Profile Portrait of a Lady*: As already noted,

even minor craftsmen working at a time when good style prevails can attain remarkable height. The question which confronts us here is, whether the portrait by Pisanello is not merely a display of craftsmanship, that is, a work of applied (decorative) and not creative art. We may justly say that the real distinction between applied and creative art is that creative art is craftsmanship inspired—craftsmanship endowed with spirit, nurtured by emotion. Works of decorative art, on the other hand, rely exclusively on established formalism. Such noble works as the early Flemish or French tapestries, Gothic carvings, or church statuary, the façade of the Duomo in Florence, are they not art? Why are these decorative masterpieces not recognized in our esthetic system as works of art? When does artisanship become art? There is but one answer to it: The spirit that generated these objects of decorative art was a *collective* spirit; it was the spirit of a certain historic period or culture, and for this very reason it lacked the catalytic agent which engenders art, the individual experience of the creator, the expression of his personal emotions and sublimations.

Pisanello's *Portrait*, although it subordinates the humanity of the subject to the display of decorative paraphernalia, thus weakening its art value, must nevertheless be considered a work of art. The convolute of inordinately spirited lines manifests the painter's feeling for design, and this arabesque design is also of his very own invention.

(The authenticity of the Pisanello painting is, like that of Raphael's *Giuliano de Medici*, questioned by some. In its bearing on the quality of painting, such considerations are, of course, immaterial.)

THOMAS LAWRENCE

LADY PEEL

Sweetness, elegance, well-being, gentle breeding: all attributes of one's disposition and station in life, and all definable by means of color and line.

Lady Peel's coloring comes from a palette which knows no harsh utterances, no willful comments. The brush-strokes suggest well-tempered animation, the contours are soft and mellow, the lines are flowing, rubber-cushioned. The whole design was born in the *maison de haute couture*.

But the sweetness and elegance of gentle ladies are hardly the substance from which a painter can derive depth, weight, and impact. The desire to prettify and to flatter emasculates the painter's power, puts him on a plane with his patron's flunkeys. Politeness is not a quality common to titans. Only extraordinary craftsmanship such as is seen in the work of a Gainsborough can elevate a fashionable lady's likeness above the level of a wigmaker's creation.

The acerbity of the above comment is really a reflection upon the relation of a society portraitist of a certain epoch to his patrons. In England this relationship invariably influenced the painter to become a decorator rather than an interpreter of humanity. Thomas Lawrence's talents had no expanse or daring, no flight or freedom. Yet, had he been born in a day of better-styled bonnets than the one Lady Peel is wearing, his art might have attained greater significance. The style of his time, pompous and flimsy as it was, did not contribute any particular format to the art of the nineteenth century glorifiers of Britain's *haute volée*.

VELAZQUEZ

(1599-1660)

PHILIP IV

(*Frick Collection, New York*)

THE SERVANT

(*Art Institute, Chicago*)

CARAVAGGIO

(MICHELANGELO AMERIGHI)

(1569-1609)

CHRIST AT EMMAUS

(*National Gallery, London*)



PHILIP IV • VELAZQUEZ

VELAZQUEZ

PHILIP IV

Two cardinal approaches can be observed in painting—the pictorial (painterly) and the linear (graphic). Velazquez belongs to the first category, Pisanello to the second. In the eyes of a painterly artist, men such as Pisanello or even Brueghel did not paint, they merely “tinted,” that is, filled the contours with colors. To fill contours with colors means simply to stress the linear aspect and not to use colors for their own sake. When following the latter course, color becomes not merely attached to form—color and form become one. In practice, all these considerations are largely a matter of contour treatment. Once the contours are not confined to rigid boundaries, but are fused, soft, or fuzzy, we speak of a painterly manner. “For extreme outline to be properly executed requires that it be nicely rounded and so illuminated as to prove the existence of something more behind it and thereby disclose that which it also seems to hide.” In these words by Pliny the whole problem seems to be implicit. If properly executed, the extreme outline should, according to Pliny, suggest rounded form. When fused, the contours are more likely to “disclose that which they seem to hide.” Here again is the essence of the pictorial conception, a conception which has Velazquez as one of its greatest protagonists. (Of course, in the painterly conception, not only the extreme outline, but all the contours as well, are fused to a lesser or stronger degree.)

When mentioning the word “pictorial” one should be aware that it is

not identical with "picturesque," formerly a well-esteemed term that is now justly held in low regard. Whereas pictorial or painterly^o refers merely to a mode of using a brush, picturesque points to romantically tinged subject matter. The picturesque always carries an air of sentimental idealization, of quaintness and artifice.

Besides the pictorial and the linear approach there is the artist's attitude toward the treatment of details. Some painters in treating details lose themselves in the inessential, the trivial; they let details defeat the main theme of the painting (see Bol, Maes, pages 36, 38). A painter can, however, give his attention to minute details and still retain monumentality as we see it in the case of Bellini (page 114). Then again, a painter like Velazquez can conceive all details as a sum total, and thus succeed in giving us only a general impression.

What makes a painter proceed in one or the other fashion? It is the style which forms the approach. But whatever the nature of a particular style, imagination is its bone and marrow. The kind and degree of a painter's imagination determines the value of his artistic approach. Obviously, the kind and degree of imagination found in the *Christ at Emmaus* is not of a high order. Not much better is Velazquez' early effort, *The Servant*. The acute observation and adroitness of both painters is hardly a redeeming factor; on the contrary, these qualities of the eye and hand led them to copy nature scrupulously and depict all the random details found in the motifs. It seems as if the artists wished to guard jealously every detail which offered itself to their brushes, unwilling to sacrifice the slightest proof of their proficiency. They seemed to be unable to muster enough courage to reorganize and alter the reality for the sake of more effectual design—in other words, to let the imagination have free rein.

Christ at Emmaus and *The Servant* are realistic representations; if unredeemed by virtue of the artist's imagination, such realism is unlikely to produce great art. This is not to say that Velazquez in his younger years was devoid of the poetic imagination that seems to be

part of an artistic pattern rather than an acquired quality, but his pre-occupation with the mastery of the art of painting had doubtless blocked its release. Some twenty-five years later, when he painted the *Portrait of Philip IV*, the keenness of his observation had not declined, nor his natural bent toward faithfulness of representation, but his imagination had gained immeasurably. Velazquez never resorted to flattery which, in effect, makes a painter reduce natural forms to time-limited ideals. He also disdained the use of classic formulas, and thus he never fell victim to the academic. His poetic imagination did not seek the exalted, but rather the common, yet he gave to it dignity, reserve, simplicity.

Simplicity, dignity, feeling for texture, mellowness of brush-stroke, are the outstanding qualities of *Philip IV*. The mellow, painterly brush-stroke makes a broad survey, and with greatest economy of means renders as well the minute details and the largely comprehended masses. Centuries later, these fleeting summary brush-strokes, suggesting rather than explaining, have come to be associated with Impressionism. In the impressionistic, or, we might say, shorthand method, Velazquez excelled even his late successors, Goya and Manet. That his art became an ideal of almost all the generations of academicians is immaterial. His painterly manner, delicacy of color, surety of hand, judgment in using emphasis or restraint, and his artistic conscientiousness, have none of the features which characterize academic art. He followed creative impulses and never relied on formulas.



THE SERVANT · VELAZQUEZ



CHRIST AT EMMAUS · CARAVACCIO

CARAVAGGIO

CHRIST AT EMMAUS

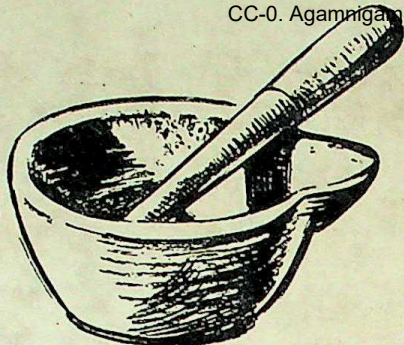
Velazquez: THE SERVANT

As I have said, both of these paintings suffer from the artists' lack of imagination. Without doubt they are beautifully executed; nothing can be said against them on that score. In fact, it is not easy to quarrel with these very talented performances. Only a few weaknesses of technique show up. In the case of Caravaggio the over-all hard contours are quite disturbing. A dense, opaque chiaroscuro unrelieved by the use of glazes is found in both painters. The exaggerated light and shade effects inject a false note into their works, and produce an aura of the melodramatic which, as in the case of Velazquez, the kitchen scene does not seem to warrant. In the *Christ At Emmaus* the dramatic suffers somewhat from stage dust—one suspects that the artist's thunder is studio-made.

CONCLUSION

Ten years ago, when I set out to investigate methodically a few of the great paintings of the past, I soon discovered that my analytical capacity was not always equal to the task. A number of serious obstacles were encountered, for not all aspects of a painting offer themselves for ready analysis. At times I have had to fight over every inch of a canvas to elicit from it the secret of its beauty. Although my analytical method seemed simple enough, the practical application often entailed difficulties. It is not the presence or absence of a certain quality which is hard to ascertain, but its relative value. Thus, a painting may not possess all the qualities which we presuppose in a great work of art, but some single element can, nevertheless, be so strong as to elevate it to the rank of a masterpiece.

I have asserted that a master key to an objective judgment can be found and that all values of true beauty and perfection are immutable. These values were not forged on Mount Sinai—they are of our own making and part of our empirical knowledge, for, as Dürer said: “Good judgment comes from good understanding, and good understanding comes from principle derived from good rules, and good rules are the daughters of good experience, the common mother of all sciences and arts.”



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